
----- WHAT'S UP, DOC? -----

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"Creating Leadership Solutions for Profit and Growth"

THIS MONTH'S THEME: SETTING HARD GOALS FOR SOFT SKILLS

This came up in a program I was running this month: how do we set measurable goals for improving 'soft' skills?" Let's say you wanted to be "be a better listener." This month's newsletter will walk you through how to make that goal more concrete, and provide you with a formula for setting any self-improvement goal you'd like.

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THIS MONTH'S QUOTES:

"Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for." -- Joseph Addison

"Whenever an individual or a business decides that success has been attained, progress stops." -- Thomas J. Watson

"The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." -- William James

1. HOW TO SET HARD GOALS FOR SOFT SKILLS

IN WHAT SITUATIONS WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACT DIFFERENTLY?

Okay, so you want to become a "better listener." That's a good goal, but it's too broad. Skill building begins on the micro level, so pick some

situation where you'd like to do better. Let's say you've gotten feedback at work that you talk over your team members. They think you jump to conclusions about what they are saying before you get the facts. Maybe your family members have said the same thing. Let's imagine your listening skills are at their worst when Rob, your teammate, comes to you to coordinate on a project, and when your spouse wants to talk with you about your son's progress in school. Those are your target situations for improvement. You may not be as good a listener in other situations as you'd like to be, but you have to start somewhere. By narrowing and defining your focus, you can begin to make progress.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THOSE SITUATIONS NOW?

Okay, this is where you need to get honest with yourself. What are you doing now that you want to change? Your natural tendency to defend yourself may limit your objectivity. In our hypothetical example, we've imagined people say you talk over them before getting the facts. That may mean you tend to think you're smarter than Rob or your spouse, or just impatient, or whatever. I'm not going to focus on your motivations. Let's just focus on your behavior. You jump in with an opinion and you don't ask questions to clarify what people are saying. It's getting in the way, impacting your ability to do projects well at work and to keep your main relationship in life on the right track. Let's assume you don't mean to brush people off or come across as arrogant, inflexible or impatient. Your current behavior is not working for you and the people around you and you want to turn it around. Good for you. Now we know what behavior we want to change, and in what situations, so we can get started.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACT DIFFERENTLY?

Saying you want to "be a better listener" is fine, but not useful since it does not spell out what you need to do differently in our target situations. In our imaginary scenario, the first thing you need to do, obviously, is keep your mouth shut. If you do nothing else, when Rob comes to you with project issues, or your spouse wants to talk about your son's schooling, by all means. . . keep your mouth shut. Make no declarations, statements, assertions or attempts to change the subject. Bite your tongue. For bonus points, if you can keep yourself from making statements, try to ask some questions. "What do you think is going on? What do you think we should do? How often is the client calling about a problem? What does his teacher think we should do?" Ask as many questions as you can. Make it a game: how many questions can you ask? Ask "stupid" questions for all I care: the point is not to interrupt Rob or your spouse, and to get information. Be sure to let them answer your questions. If they ask you what you think, go ahead and answer, but don't declare what you think before you listen and explore what they think first.

WHAT NEW “BATTING AVERAGE” WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE?

Don't aim for perfection or overnight change. You will only frustrate yourself by setting unrealistic expectations, or set yourself on the binge behavioral change plan. That means you have a perfect record for a while through superhuman effort, then fall off your new pattern to return to your old habits all over again. Don't binge and don't aim for perfection. If you want to make sustainable change, set realistic goals and stick with them, working your way up. It takes perhaps thousands of repetitions for new habits to take over. In our example, you might want to set the minimal goal for the first three months of keeping your mouth shut roughly three out of five times, without interrupting or talking over either Rob or your spouse. That's it. Improve your batting average, but don't aim for perfection. Build up the consistent habit of biting your tongue before setting higher goals, like always keeping you mouth shut without interrupting, or asking questions at least three out of five times. Figure out some realistic goal and set a time frame (in this case, three months), and then you can change your goal depending on your progress.

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HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE MAKING PROGRESS?

The beauty of defining your goals in terms of your actions is it helps you measure your results. Most soft skill self-improvement efforts fail because well meaning people don't know how to do this. Measurement improves performance, particularly when results are public. Some people recommend keeping your own progress journal, and that's a nice idea, but if you keep your intention to change your behavior a secret, your results will likely be invisible. That's been my experience. I'm recommending you tell the right people what you are up to so they can give you feedback. Even if they are so angry with you that their feedback will be biased, just taking the high road to show you are making an effort can help heal the

damage to a broken relationship. In our example, I would recommend our friend tell Rob at work and his spouse of his intent to listen better, first and foremost, by not interrupting. He should tell both of them that he would like their help in monitoring his progress. Public accountability produces results, and if our person in the sample is serious about improving his listening skills, this is the best way to do it. After about three months, he should formally ask Rob and his spouse their opinions of his performance, gathering that data with his own observations to see how well he has done.

WHAT IF YOU GET OFF TRACK AND LOSE MOMENTUM?

Well, most people do get off track and lose momentum. If you have not asked others with an interest in your change of behavior to help you monitor your progress, then go back to this step and do it. But, let's say, after three months, you find you began well, with good results and good intentions, but you lost momentum. Go back and ask yourself, "Did I set the right goals?" It may be that you picked the wrong situation as a laboratory for your improvement, or you set goals that were either too high or too low, and therefore lost interest. Perhaps you really don't have as much motivation to change as you had hoped, and if that's the case, why is that? In the example of our challenged listener, perhaps he is holding on to old resentments that are interfering with his current relationships and effectiveness at work. Maybe Rob made a joke at an office party three years ago that left our subject feeling humiliated. Who knows? Whatever it may be, let it go. You don't have to feel comfortable with new behaviors to build new habits. In fact, you will most assuredly NOT feel comfortable with your new behaviors: that's the point. You need to practice them over and over long before you feel comfortable before feeling at ease. Repetition makes new behaviors automatic. It makes them habits. That's how you can develop new "soft" skills, like listening, or being more assertive, or becoming more organized, or whatever your own goals may be. Good luck!

2. RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ENTERTAINMENT

FILM/DVD: "Wallace and Gromit in Three Amazing Adventures," 1996

This set of award winning shorts based on the fantastically popular Wallace and Gromit characters is worth viewing, and if you have younger kids, owning. Adults should not be put off by the claymation: the classic, slapstick comedic "performances" of the characters are as good as anything you will find among classic performances of Chaplin, W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, the Crosby/Hope "Road"

films, Abbott and Costello. . . you get the idea. This is material right from the heart of classic film comedy. Buy the DVD [here](#).

BOOK: "How Would a Patriot Act?" by Glenn Greenwald

I've never recommended a political work in my years of writing this newsletter, other than a book by John McCain a few years ago, but Glenn Greenwald is a friend of mine, and I've had the privilege of previewing his book. Whatever your political beliefs, this soon to be released work presents an articulate review of serious issues. It is currently #1 at Amazon, even though it is being produced by an independent, small publisher and won't be released until May 15. Pretty impressive stuff. Here's where you can [preorder](#) a copy if you wish.

3. CHUCKLES

The following is supposedly a true story relating to an actual event that took place during a flight:

As a jet was flying over Arizona on a clear day, the co-pilot was providing his passengers with a running commentary about landmarks over the PA system.

"Coming up on the right, you can see the Meteor Crater, which is a major tourist attraction in northern Arizona. It was formed when a lump of nickel and iron, roughly 150 feet in diameter and weighing 300,000 tons, struck the earth at about 40,000 miles an hour, scattering white-hot debris for miles in every direction. The hole measures nearly a mile across and is 570 feet deep."

From the cabin, a passenger was heard to exclaim, "Wow! It just missed the highway!"

4. PROMOTE YOUR OWN GROWTH

You don't have to live near the Schuler Solutions main office in Alexandria, Virginia to benefit from my coaching services. Great work can be done for your own growth and development over the phone and through document review via email. To find out more about your coaching options and available coaching plans, just click [here](#) now.

5. ABOUT DR. SCHULER

A. J. Schuler, Psy. D., an expert on leadership, negotiation and organizational change, provides consulting services, keynote presentations and seminars for client companies. His trademark is highly personalized service that leads to measurable increases in productivity, profit and growth. He also provides personalized leadership education and coaching for highly motivated clients.

Dr. Schuler, President of Schuler Solutions, Inc., has served diverse organizations in the private and public sectors, including The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sony Development, Nomura Securities and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, Dr. Schuler now teaches negotiation in the MBA program there. He has successfully led the profitable growth of a dynamic, international consulting firm while serving as Operations Director, and has successfully coached over five hundred CEO's and corporate executives.

6. HOW TO SUBSCRIBE OR UNSUBSCRIBE

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7. NEWSLETTER STATEMENT OF ETHICS

NEWSLETTER ETHICS: This e-Newsletter will be sent to subscribers only upon REQUEST, though subscribers may forward this letter to anyone they wish. Subscriber identities or contact information will NOT BE DISCLOSED to any other persons or entities under any circumstances. (An attorney friend recently pointed out that, technically, I'd have to give up my list if compelled to do so by a court of law. He's technically right, of course, but let's face it: that won't happen!)

Have a great month. . .

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"Make each day your masterpiece." -- John Wooden

P.S. - Remember to send in your comments and successes, and to forward this newsletter to at least one friend! Thanks . . . AJS