



The Best Advice I Ever Received

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

Like many young Ph.D. students, while I studied at UCLA, I was deeply impressed with my own intelligence, wisdom and profound insights into the human condition. I consistently amazed myself with my ability to judge others and see what they were doing wrong.

Dr. Fred Case was both my dissertation adviser and boss. My dissertation was connected with a consulting project with that involved the city government of Los Angeles. At the time, Case was not only a professor at UCLA, but also head of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission. At this point in my career, he was clearly the most important person in my professional life. He had done amazing work to help the city become a better place, and also was doing a lot to help me.

Although he was generally upbeat, one day Case seemed annoyed. “Marshall, what is the problem with you?” he growled. “I’m getting feedback from some people at City Hall that you are coming across as negative, angry and judgmental. What’s going on?”

“You can’t believe how inefficient the city government is,” I ranted. I then gave several examples of how taxpayers’ money was not being used in the way I thought it should. I was convinced that the city could be a much better place if the leaders would just listen to me.

“What a stunning breakthrough,” Case sarcastically remarked. “You, Marshall Goldsmith, have discovered that our city government is inefficient. I hate to tell you this, Marshall, but my barber down on the corner figured this out several years ago. What else is bothering you?”

Undeterred by this temporary setback, I angrily proceeded to point out several minor examples of behavior that could be classified as favoritism toward rich political benefactors.

Case was now laughing. “Stunning breakthrough number two,” he said. “Your profound investigative skills have led to the discovery that politicians may give more attention to their major campaign contributors than to people who support their opponents. I’m sorry to report that my barber has also known this for years. I’m afraid that we can’t give you a Ph.D. for this level of insight.”

As he looked at me, his face showed the wisdom that can only come from years of

experience. “I know that you think that I may be old and behind the times,” he said, “but I’ve been working down there at City Hall for years. Did it ever dawn on you that even though I may be slow, perhaps even I have figured some of this stuff out?”

Then he delivered the advice I will never forget: “Marshall, you are becoming a pain in the butt. You are not helping the people who are supposed to be your clients. You are not helping me, and you are not helping yourself. I am going to give you two options: Option A: Continue to be angry, negative and judgmental. If you chose this option, you will be fired, you probably will never graduate, and you may have wasted the last four years of your life. Option B: Start having some fun. Keep trying to make a constructive difference, but do it in a way that is positive for you and the people around you.

“My advice is this: You are young. Life is short. Start having fun. What option are you going to choose, son?”

I finally laughed and replied, “Dr. Case, I think it is time for me to start having some fun!”

He smiled knowingly and said, “You are a wise young man.”

Most of my life is spent working with leaders in huge organizations. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that things are not always as efficient as they could be. Almost every employee has made this discovery. It also doesn’t take a genius to learn that people are occasionally more interested in their own advancement than the welfare of the company. Most employees have already figured this out as well.

I learned a great lesson from Case. Real leaders are not people who can point out what is wrong. Almost anyone can do that. Real leaders are people who can make things better.

Case’s coaching didn’t just help me get a Ph.D. and become a better consultant. He helped me have a better life, and his advice can help you too. First, think about your own behavior at work. Are you communicating a sense of joy and enthusiasm to the people around you, or are you spending too much time in the role of angry, judgmental critic? Second, do you have any co-workers who are acting like I did? Are you just getting annoyed with them, or are you trying to help them in same way that Case helped me? If you haven’t been trying to help them, why not give it a shot? Perhaps they’ll write a story about you someday.

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