

# 23 MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

## Ask, Learn, Follow-up, and Grow

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In a talk to the Drucker Foundation Advisory Board in 1993, Peter Drucker said, “The leader of the past was a person who knew how to *tell*. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to *ask*.” The traditional hierarchical model of leadership will not work effectively for major organizations in tomorrow’s changing world.

In the “old days,” a person was hired into a position, learned the job, and—usually because of some form of functional proficiency—received a promotion into management. Then, as a manager, this same person could tell a *few* people what to do. Next, if the person was skilled and/or lucky, more promotions followed until he or she eventually became an executive who could tell *lots* of people what to do.

In most cases, the leader of the future won’t *know* enough to tell people what to do. The world is changing too rapidly. No one person will be smart enough to keep up. As Edgar Schein notes in this volume, leaders will need to effectively involve others and elicit participation “because tasks will be too complex and information too widely distributed for leaders to solve problems on their own.”

If leaders will not be able to keep up with the rapidly changing world, detailed policy manuals don’t have a chance! Many organizations have historically operated on the “there is one best way” school of management. A classic example was the old Bell System. The basic philosophy was very clear: “There is one best way to do things. Let’s figure out what it is, put it in a manual, and make sure everyone does it that way.” One former Bell System executive, who later became a high-level executive in a “Baby Bell,” jokingly remarked, “In the old Bell System we had rules, regulations, and guidelines on how to do everything but go to the bathroom—and they probably had a task force assigned to study that!” He went on to note that this regimentation was the philosophy of *yesterday*, not the philosophy of *tomorrow*.

Did the old Bell System, complete with its shelves of policy manuals, work? Pretty well! It worked in a relatively stable world without aggressive competitors. However, as leaders in the new AT&T now realize, the old command-and-control model of leadership will not encourage the creativity and responsiveness needed to get tomorrow’s job done.

A classic example of a new-world organization is AT&T Wireless Services (formerly McCaw Cellular Communications); which AT&T paid twelve billion dollars to acquire. In the changing world of cellular communications, a company can go from state of the art to

dinosaur in a matter of months. For example, imagine that AT&T Wireless needed to make major changes because of problems in a local market, but before the changes could be made:

1. Employees had to “bubble” their concerns through each level in the AT&T system
2. A task force had to be assigned
3. New policy manuals had to be written
4. The new procedures had to be disseminated down the chain of command to the local employees

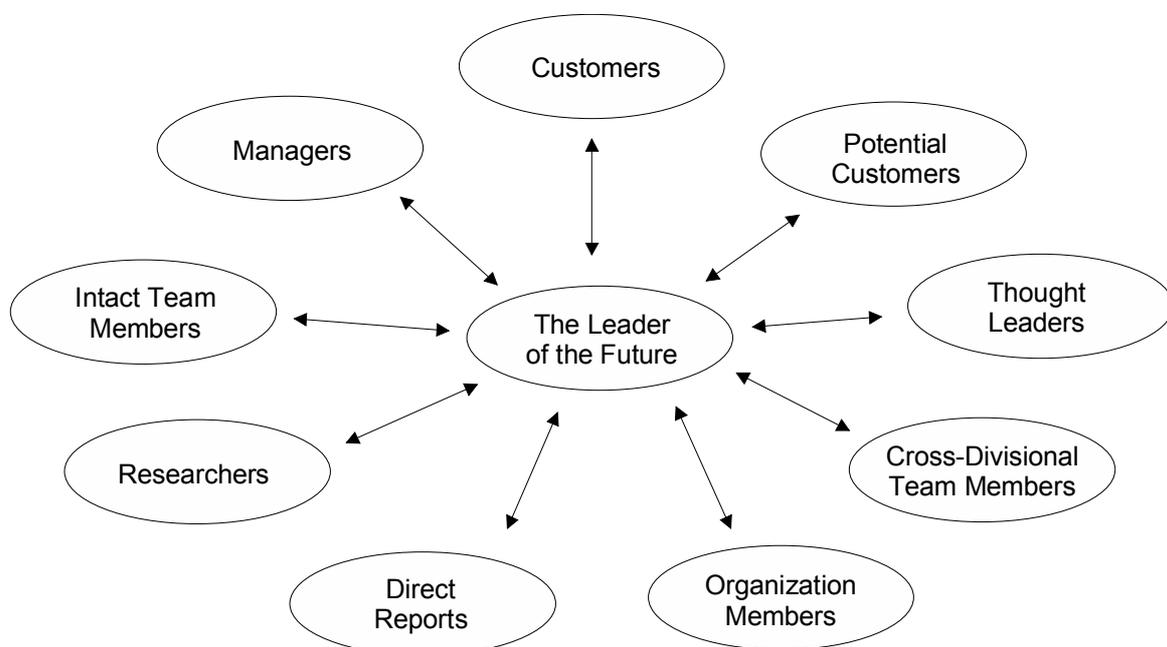
What would happen? The local market would be lost, the bright, entrepreneurial employees would leave the company to work for competitors, and AT&T would lose an important part of its twelve-billion-dollar investment. AT&T is a great example of an organization that has realized that success in the past does not guarantee success in the future. In today’s AT&T, leaders are trained to “break the mold,” empower people, and consistently reach out to acquire new insights.

How will the leader of tomorrow differ from the leader of yesterday? The thought leaders represented in this book describe a variety of differences; I will describe one key process. The effective leader of the future will consistently and efficiently *ask, learn, follow up,* and grow. The leader who cannot keep learning and growing will soon become obsolete in tomorrow’s ever-changing world.

## Ask

The effective leader of the future will consistently ask—to receive feedback and to solicit new ideas. Tomorrow’s leader will ask a variety of key stakeholders for ideas, opinions, and feedback. Vital sources of information will include present and potential customers, suppliers, team members, cross-divisional peers, direct reports, managers, other members of the organization, researchers, and thought leaders (see Figure 23.1). The leader will ask in a variety of ways: through leadership inventories, satisfaction surveys, phone calls, voice mail, e-mail, the Internet, satellite hookups, and in-person dialogue.

Figure 23.1. The Challenge: Reaching Out for Input, but Not Drowning in a Sea of Information.



The trend toward asking is already very clear. Twenty years ago very few top executives *ever* asked for feedback. Today the majority of the most highly respected leaders in North America *regularly* ask for feedback, in companies such as American Express, General Electric, Eastman Kodak, McKinsey & Co., Merck, Motorola, Nortel, and Pfizer. This trend is also growing rapidly throughout the world.

One global leader who spends a great deal of his life asking is George Weber, the secretary-general of the international Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). With a worldwide staff that contains representatives from ninety-five countries and a customer base that spans the globe, George is continuously asking key stakeholders for ideas on how he and his organization can better meet the needs of the world's most vulnerable people. He believes that the IFRC can only remain viable through consistent internal and external asking.

Aside from the obvious benefit of gaining new ideas and insights, asking by top leaders has a secondary benefit that may be even more important. The leader who asks is providing a role model. Sincere asking demonstrates a willingness to learn, a desire to serve, and a humility that can be an inspiration for the entire organization.

## **Learn**

Peter Senge has written extensively about the future importance of the learning organization. The learning organization will need to be led by people who model continuous learning in their own day-to-day behavior. Two keys to learning are (1) effective listening and (2) reflection after asking for and receiving information. Asking for input and then "shooting the messenger" who delivers the bad news is worse than not asking at all. Leaders will need to provide recognition and support for people who have the courage to tell the hard truth before issues become disasters. Another major challenge for the leader of the future will be prioritization. Leaders will face the danger of drowning in a sea of information (see Figure 23.1). There is more to learn than any human can effectively process. One leader in Sun Microsystems reported that he received approximately two hundred e-mail messages *per day*. Leaders will need to focus on the vital few areas for change from each important source of information.

Although the leader of the future will need to receive input more frequently and from more sources, the time available to process this information may actually be declining. Today leaders exist in a world that is characterized by downsizing and ongoing reengineering. They need to get more work done, get it done faster, and get it done with considerably less support staff. In the private sector, there are no indications that global competition will *decrease* in the future or that leaders will have more time and more staff. In the social sector, there are no indications that human needs will decrease, or that government will take care of more social problems. Leaders who can ask, process information, and learn in a highly efficient manner will have a tremendous competitive advantage over their slower and less proactive competition.

## **Follow-Up**

Keilty, Goldsmith & Company recently conducted a study on the impact of asking for feedback and following up with over eight thousand leaders in a Fortune 100 company. Each manager in the company asked for feedback from direct reports, using a Leadership Inventory

that had been designed to reinforce the company's new values. After receiving a confidential summary feedback report, each manager was asked to:

1. Pick one to three key areas for improvement and develop an action plan for desired change
2. *Respond* to the co-workers by thanking them for the feedback, discussing the action plan, and involving them in the change process
3. *Follow up* with co-workers to check on progress and receive further assistance

Managers were asked to spend only five to fifteen minutes responding in a focused two-way dialogue. They also were asked to spend only a few minutes following up by asking for a "progress report" and further suggestions.

Approximately eighteen months after initially providing feedback, co-workers were asked to again provide feedback to their managers using the Leadership Inventory. Two additional questions were added to the inventory concerning:

1. The manager's degree of change in leadership effectiveness
2. The manager's degree of follow-up

The findings of the study were dramatic but not surprising. The degree of change in perceived leadership effectiveness was clearly related to the degree of follow-up (see Figure 23.2). Managers who were seen as *not following up* were perceived as only slightly more effective as a group than they were eighteen months earlier. Although 46 percent were rated as more effective, over half were rated as unchanged or less effective. Managers rated as *doing some follow-up* experienced a very positive shift in scores, with 89 percent being rated as more effective. Almost half of the leaders in this group (45 percent) were rated in the highest two categories (+2 or +3) and almost none (3 percent) were seen as less effective. *Consistent or periodic follow-up* had a dramatic, positive impact. Over half the leaders (55 percent) were rated in the highest possible category, with 86 percent rated either +2 or +3.

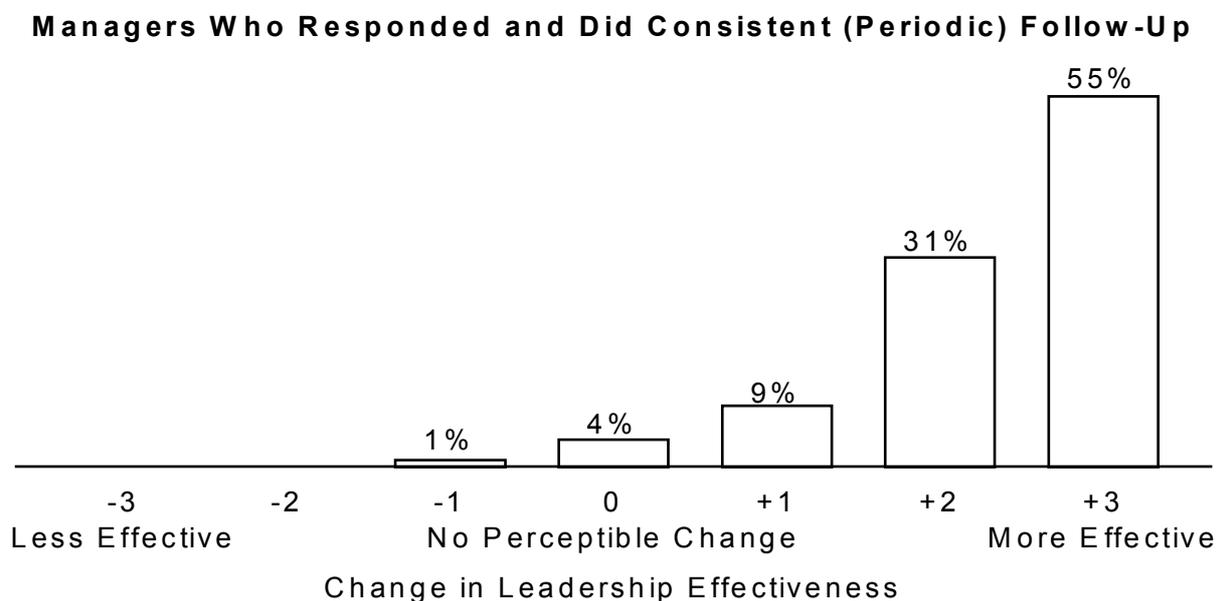
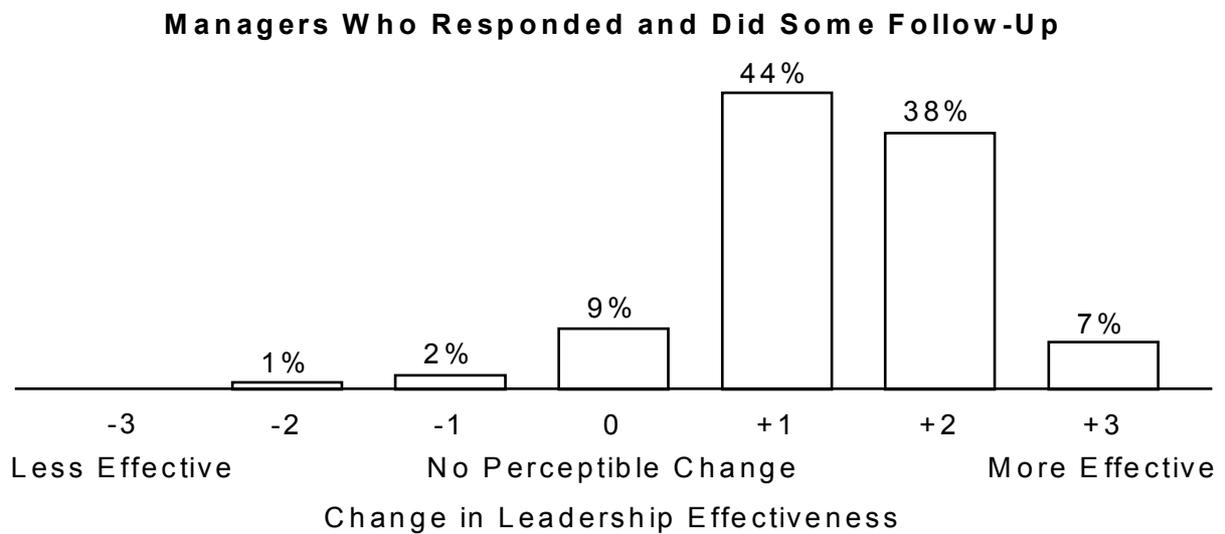
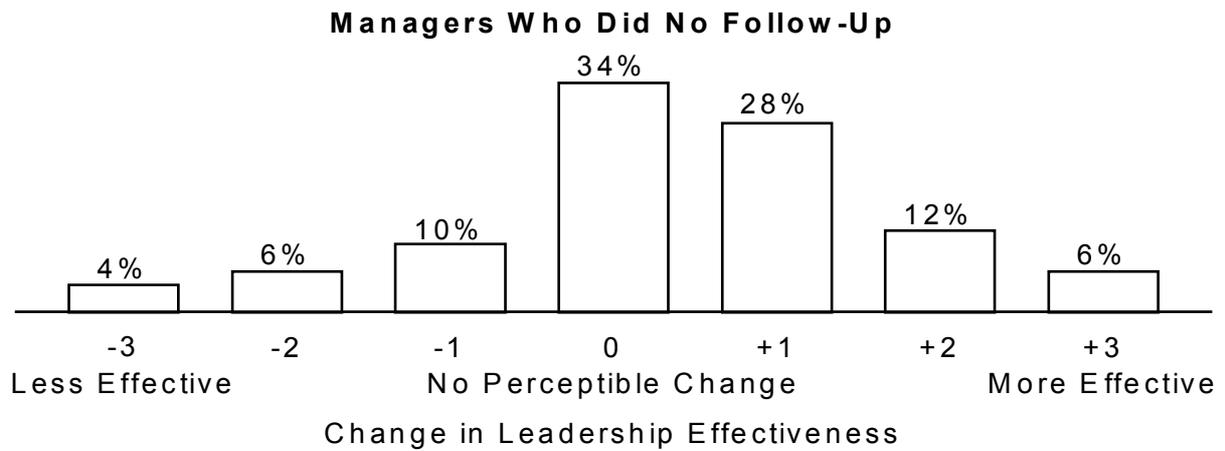
Studies similar to this one are being completed in six other major corporations with leaders from over twenty countries. So far, the results have been remarkably consistent. Studies have also been conducted concerning the impact of asking for feedback and following up with team members and external customers. Results point to a very similar pattern: team members and suppliers who ask for feedback, respond in a positive manner, and follow up are seen by their fellow team members and external customers as dramatically increasing in effectiveness.

Follow-up will be a key challenge for the leader of the future. For "real-world" leaders, asking and learning will have to be more than an academic exercise. The process will have to produce meaningful, positive change. By learning how to follow up efficiently and effectively in an extremely busy world, leaders will enable key stakeholders to see the positive actions that result from the input they were requested to provide.

## Grow

The leader of the future will have to change and grow on the job. Can this happen? Definitely, yes! Leaders who reach out, ask for input, learn, respond in a positive manner, involve key stakeholders, and follow up will almost invariably be seen as becoming more effective and as growing over time.

Figure 23.2. Findings on the Relationship Between Follow-up and Perceived Leadership Effectiveness.



As demands on leaders increase, effective leadership growth and development will become more important than ever. However, the methodology of leadership development may radically change. Historically, leadership development efforts have tended to focus on the “front side” of the development process: impressive training, well-designed forms, clever slogans, and lots of “flash.” They have not focused on the “back side” of the process: the ongoing application of what is being learned. Follow-up studies have validated the obvious. What leaders do back on the job will be more meaningful than what they do in classrooms.

Future leadership development will not be like *getting* in shape. It will be like *staying* in shape. Recent research has indicated that the “program-of-the-year” approach to leadership development has the same impact as the crash-diet approach to physical fitness. The results don’t last! Many organizations have spent millions of dollars on programs and almost nothing on follow-up. In the future, far more effort will be placed on developing the processes required to ensure positive, ongoing leadership growth. By developing processes that ensure ongoing asking, learning, and follow-up, leaders will grow in a manner that produces a positive, measurable impact.

## Conclusion

The leader of the future will face different and in many ways more challenging demands than the leader of the past. Global competition will rapidly increase, organizations will continue to downsize and reengineer, leaders will have less support staff, workloads will probably increase, and the pace of change will accelerate. The need for human services will continue to increase at a rate greater than the government’s ability to meet the need. Traditional hierarchies will break down and the number and fluidity of stakeholder relationships will keep growing. The leader who tries to know it all and to tell everyone what to do is doomed to failure. The leader who believes that there is only one best way and attempts to write detailed procedures has no chance.

Almost all of the thought leaders represented in this book believe that the leader of the future will need to continuously involve and learn from others. Unfortunately, as this need is increasing, the time available to do it is decreasing. As the amount of information made available to the leader is increasing, the time to process it is decreasing. The leader of the future will need to be able to effectively focus and prioritize, in a period of rapid change, focus and the frequency of interactions may become more critical than the duration of the interactions.

Recent research has shown that leaders who ask for input from key stakeholders; learn with a positive, nondefensive attitude; and follow up in a focused, efficient manner will almost invariably grow and develop in terms of increased effectiveness. Learning from input and increasing leadership effectiveness is a lot like getting a physical exam and changing one’s life-style. The doctor usually suggests, “Go on a low-fat diet and work out every other day.” The challenge is not in *understanding* this advice, but in *doing it*. As Arnold Schwarzenegger once said, “Nobody ever got muscles by watching *me* lift weights.”

I leave you, the reader, with a final challenge. By reading this book you have already demonstrated one characteristic of the effective leader of the future. You have reached out to get the latest information from a variety of sources. Read the articles with an open mind. Try to see the value of opinions that may differ from your own. After completing this book, develop the profile of the leader of the future that *you* want to be. *Ask* for input from your key stakeholders on how your behavior and activity match your vision, *learn* from what people tell you about yourself and your opportunities for the future, prioritize and focus on a few key areas for change, and follow *up* to ensure effective implementation. Completing these key steps can help you to *grow* and become the leader of the future that you want to be.

This chapter is take from the book:

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