

Why We Don't Do What We Know We Should Do

by Marshall Goldsmith

For: Fast Company

A couple of years ago I taught a series of one-day courses for the top 2,000 leaders in one of the world's most admired and most valuable corporations. As part of the courses, each leader received confidential 360° feedback.

I asked all of the participants to pick 1-2 areas for personal improvement, talk with their co-workers about what they were going to change, ask for suggestions on how they could become more effective leaders and then follow-up to help ensure that this process led to a positive, long-term change in leadership behavior. In confidential surveys after the course, almost all of the participants enthusiastically agreed that they were going to do what they were asked to do.

A year later, almost 70% of the leaders actually did something related to their commitments. About 30% did absolutely nothing. The "good news" for the 70% was that their key stakeholders rated them as becoming more effective leaders. The other good news was that the 30% who did nothing weren't seen as getting much worse!

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to interview hundreds of leaders in the "did nothing" category. I asked them why they didn't do what they said they would do. Their answers seldom have anything to do with ethics or integrity. In spite of some recent examples of terrible ethics violations, the huge majority of leaders that I meet are highly ethical people.

They are not liars or phonies. They truly believed that they should change and that this was the "right thing to do". Their answers seldom have anything to do with lack of intelligence or understanding. These are very bright people. They not only agreed with what they committed to do, they understood what to do and how to do it.

Why didn't these leaders do what they said they were going to do? Why in life do we often fail to do what we know we should do?

The answer can be explained by a dream. This is a dream that I have had for years. I am going to predict that you have probably had this dream. In fact, you may have had this dream on a recurring basis for years.

As a reader, you may be getting a little skeptical right now. You may be thinking, "This guy doesn't know my dreams. What is he talking about?" We will see how accurate my guess is.

What does the dream sound like?

"You know, I am incredibly busy right now. In fact, I feel about as busy today as I have ever felt in my entire life. To be honest, a lot of the time I just feel over-committed. To be real honest – given what is going on at work and at home – sometimes my life feels a little out of control.

But, you see, I am working on some very unique and special challenges right now. I think that the worst of this will be over in four or five months. After that I am going to take a couple of weeks and get organized. I am going to start working on my personal development. Then I am going to start spending some more time with my family. I may even start my 'healthy lifestyle' program. After that everything is going to be different – and it won't be crazy anymore."

Have you ever had a dream that vaguely resembles this dream? I have had this dream – so have most of leaders that I meet every week. Many have been having this same dream for years.

I have learned a hard lesson trying to help real leaders, change real behavior in the real world. There is no "two or three weeks". Sanity does not prevail. Look at the trend line. There is an outside chance that tomorrow is going to be even crazier than today.

Why don't we do what we know we should do? We are waiting until life isn't crazy. We are waiting until we "have some time". We are waiting for a day that may never appear.

My suggestion is for you, as a leader, to ask yourself a couple of very hard questions. What change is going to make the biggest, positive difference for me? What am I willing to change now? Not next week, not next month, not when everything starts to make sense – now.

Don't worry so much about everything else.

Just change that.