

**O**PRAH WINFREY probably is the best-known dieter in the world. For more than 20 years, viewers and the tabloid press all across the globe have watched her weight yo-yo up and down. They have applauded her success when she got the pounds off and commiserated when the weight came back. In the January 2009 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Winfrey confessed that she again had ballooned to the 200-pound mark. "I'm mad at myself," she wrote. "I'm embarrassed. . . . I can't believe that after all these years, all the things I know how to do, I'm still talking about my weight."

Moving from talk to setting an intention, and staying in that intention, is no easy task, as Winfrey has discovered. Despite a support group that numbers in the millions, the best coaches that money can buy, and a spotlight glaringly fixed on her every pound, she has not yet mastered the ability to lose weight permanently. Winfrey is no different from many of us. We set goals; we reach; we grasp—and then we fall back on old habits. We remain down on ourselves for a while, until we muster up the courage to begin anew, only to have the cycle repeat itself.

If unlimited resources are not the answer, nor is access to celebrity coaches and trainers or a cheering section that numbers in the millions, what is the secret to permanent behavior change? What separates those who make it to the top of the mountain from those who get stuck on the uphill climb and those who, like Winfrey, no sooner reach the pinnacle than they backslide?

People do succeed in changing their own behavior, not just temporarily, but for the rest of their lives. Shrinking violets become toastmasters; stock boys become CEOs; second-stringers become star athletes; abusive spouses become supportive partners; entrepreneurs create empires. Every day, people who once saw themselves as losers become winners. They go from being mad at themselves and embarrassed by their failures to possessing a new sense of self-esteem and real pride in their accomplishments.

Change begins with making choices. There are many theories that attempt to explain human behavior and change. Original sin; the Freudian triangulation of id, ego, and superego; and the social or economic determinism posited by socialist philosopher Karl Marx and others quickly come to mind. However valid these theories may be, change at a personal level ultimately involves a fundamental choice. People can choose how they behave. By setting an intention to change, they can trigger a process of reflecting, imagining, willing, and, ultimately, acting.

The goal may be to improve their performance—on the job, in a sport, or at a hobby. It may be to improve the way they relate to the significant others in their life, or it may be to improve themselves—to get healthier, shed bad habits, or become a "new person," however they choose to define this. No matter what the intention, the same process we use to transform executive performance can be applied to help ordinary people perform better in all aspects of their lives. Self-coaching is an especially exciting and effective pathway

# Whatever Is Necessary

BY HOWARD M. GUTTMAN

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to personal change because a person ultimately becomes accountable for his or her own success.

Now, let us move from people in general to you: what keeps you from reaching your personal and professional goals? What “new person” do you want to become, and how can you take control of your behavior and command your future by relying on your own internal resources and a small team of supporters?

After more than 20 years of personally coaching some of the toughest cases—executives with big jobs and even bigger challenges, whose workplace behavior ranged from passive to aggressive and everything in between—I have concluded that there is a pathway that is sure to lead to lasting behavior change, whether the change you seek is in the workplace or in your life space. That pathway is made up of several steps. When I coach executives, I take them through each step, providing them with tools and support, until they reach their goal. Individuals can self-coach themselves to success by following the same steps, with minor variations. Remember, though, self-coaching is not for everyone.

If you are thinking about self-coaching, I suspect that you probably are experiencing discontent with some area of your life. You may have a nagging feeling that there can be, and should be, more to life than the status quo. You are ready for change. Let us do a little exploration together, just to get started. Get comfortable and take a good look inside yourself: What do you see and feel? How satisfied or happy are you with things as they are? Where are you professionally, emotionally, physically, and socially—especially in terms of those who matter most to you? Is change an option that you are willing to consider?

As you review your interior landscape, are there areas in which you feel discomfort, unhappiness, or even pain? They well may be things that you constantly beat down, like one of those pop-up games at an arcade, or that you habitually paper over with procrastination and excuses. You never may have discussed them even with your closest friends or family.

Now, dig deeper. Is there an area that, if it were altered, would represent a significant, even life-changing, improvement for you? As you reflect, be mindful that the act of self-reflection is not merely an intellectual exercise. You must not merely think that the need for change is an imperative; you also must feel its urgency. Give it your full attention—and give it time. Do not expect a bolt of lightning to strike you, though be grateful if it does. As you go through this exercise, focus on one—and only one—area in which your life could be improved significantly.

It is decision time. Now that you have selected the area that you would like to improve, ask yourself: Am I able, ready, and willing to change my behavior permanently? Concentrate on each of the five key concepts in this one question: ability, readiness, willingness, permanency, and behavior. Each represents an element that needs to be considered as you attempt to arrive at your answer.

Since any attempt at improving yourself or your performance revolves around behavior change, that is what we will focus on. I learned

very early in my executive coaching that my job is to get the people I coach to act differently. I focus on changing observable behavior, which is the only reliable indicator of performance. As your own coach, that is where your focus needs to be. Statements such as “respect diversity,” “be more understanding,” or “be a better friend” mean nothing until you take them to a granular level of behavior. If you want to be a better family member, start by thinking about your behavior: How am I behaving? Am I doing something that causes distress? Then, ask the members of your family: “How am I doing?” and “How can I add more value to our relationship?” You might hear things like, “Don’t be so impatient; listen more; give me more space to be who I am without trying to change me.” These all are suggestions on which you can take action.

Are you in it for the long haul? Sisyphus, the tragic figure of ancient Greek mythology, was condemned by the gods to push a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down again, so that he had to repeat the task over and over for eternity. Many of us condemn ourselves to the same fate. We make a commitment to long-term change, but then quietly whisper to ourselves, “This does not have to be forever. I will reach my goal. Then, every so often, I’ll be able to smoke a cigarette or take a drink or eat a slice of chocolate cake.” Those who try to ease the pain with such self-sabotage invariably lose whatever ground they worked so hard to win.

Sustained behavioral change is the only true measure of the success of any coaching program, whether in the business or the personal realm. Unless you make up your mind that you are going to change your behavior permanently, you forever condemn yourself to rolling the same boulder up the same mountain.

The entire premise of executive coaching is that people are 100% accountable for their behavior and that, if the stakes are high enough and they understand what their options are, they can choose to change that behavior. Yet, there are some people who truly are unable to make the changes needed to achieve their goals. Something inside of them keeps getting in the way; they cannot help sabotaging their own efforts. When the inability to control behavior is rooted in emotional or psychological dysfunction, then coaching and self-coaching are inappropriate. If you suspect that you have some deep-seated psychological issues that need to be resolved, it is a good idea to get them out of the way before you attempt any coaching program.

Researchers at the University of Maryland indicate that there are five stages of behavior change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance—and it is not until people enter the preparation stage that they are able to commit to making real changes in their lives. Why is this? The research team found that, during the second stage, contemplation, individuals begin to weigh the pros and cons of changing their behavior, and many of them are extremely ambivalent. This ambivalence immobilizes them and, until they recognize that the pros definitely outweigh the cons, they are unable to make a commitment.

One of the roles of a coach may be to educate the coachee about the negative consequences of not changing but, if you are planning to coach yourself, you are going to have to be your own educator. When you can answer yes, without hesitation, to the question, “Are you convinced that you have a lot more to gain than to lose by going for your goal?” you are ready to start self-coaching.

However, one big question still remains: are you willing to do whatever is necessary to change your behavior? That is a tough question and, to answer it, you need to know, specifically, what is going to be asked of you during the self-coaching process. Here are a few of things that you will need to do:

**Acknowledge the fact that you, and only you, are responsible for your failure to achieve your goals.** All of us have a hand in writing our life’s script, whether we are conscious of it or not. In order for your self-coaching to work, you cannot be a victim.

**Go beyond acknowledgment—to action.** Some people are what I call responsible victims: they acknowledge the part they play in creating a situation that is not working for them, but they stop there; they own up to their faults over and over again, but they never make the needed changes. Becoming conscious merely is an academic exercise if it is not accompanied by the willingness to take action.

**Drop your defenses.** When someone questions or criticizes us, our first reaction is to defend ourselves against the attack or to flee, often by going underground. Unless you are willing to drop your defenses, self-coaching is not an option.

**Depersonalize.** I tell the executives I coach that they need to view their colleagues’ critiques of them purely as a “business case.” As you move through the self-coaching process, you may hear some uncomplimentary things about yourself from others. You also are going to have to look at yourself with a critical eye and not feel emotionally invested.

**Reframe your “stories.”** We all have stories about why we cannot or should not make changes in our life: “I can’t quit smoking; I’ll gain weight” or “I’ll never be able to get a promotion; I’m not one of the ‘in’ group.” Until you replace them with positive ones, your self-coaching efforts will be doomed to failure.

**Go public.** Each executive that I coach has a mentor to support him or her and a group of stakeholders who provide feedback on the coachee’s behavior before, during, and after the coaching. The willingness to enlist the support of others, be totally frank with them, and accept their honest feedback is just as important in self-coaching. If you are not willing to accept the support—and critique—of others, then you really are not willing to sign up for self-coaching. ★

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