

Some Wisdom from Marshall Goldsmith

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Q. What's the most common behavior problem you've found in the executives you've worked with?

A. An obsession with winning – and this isn't just CEOs. It's common in most highly successful people, including me. When the issue is important, naturally we all want to win. But if it's trivial, we still want to win. Even if it's not worth our time, or it's to our disadvantage, we often try to win anyway.

Q. What's wrong with winning?

A. Here's an example I use with clients: You want to go to dinner at Restaurant X. Your spouse wants to go to dinner at Restaurant Y. You have a heated debate. You go to Restaurant Y, though it's not your choice. The food's bad; the service is awful. Now, you've got two options. Option A: Critique the food, and point out to your spouse how wrong he or she was and how this debacle could have been avoided if he or she had listened to you. Option B: Be quiet, eat the food, and try to have a nice evening.

What do 75% of my executive clients say they would do in this situation? Critique the food. What do they agree they should do? Shut up. If they do a cost-benefit analysis, they realize that their marriage is more important than winning the argument. So I tell my clients, "Before you get into any conflict, take a deep breath and ask yourself, 'Is it worth it? What do I have to gain by winning? What do I have to lose?'"

A related problem is what I call adding too much value. Imagine you're the CEO. I come to you with an idea that you think is very good, but rather than just say, "Great idea!" your tendency, because you have to win, is to say, "Good idea, but do it this way." Well, you may have improved the quality of my idea by 5%, but you've reduced my commitment to executing it by 30% because you took away my ownership. The higher up you get on the corporate ladder, the more you need to make other people winners, and not make it about winning yourself. One of my clients who's now a CEO at a major company said that once he got into the habit of taking a breath before he talked, he realized that about half of what he was going to say wasn't worth saying. Even though he thought he was right, he realized he had more to gain by not winning.