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Marshall Goldsmith is one of the good, authentic leaders in executive coaching and consulting. I strongly recommend his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, as well as his [blog](http://www.marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com) on his website: www.marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com

It is hard to demonstrate his insights and impact in a few words, but here are some representative excerpts from a 10/20/08 blog entry: "There are two mistakes executive clients often make in working with a coach. The first, as I've said, is getting the wrong coach. The second is to expect that it's the coach's responsibility to make you change. It's not the coach's job, it's yours.

"Let's say the behavioral problem you want to fix is that you make too many destructive comments. ... Scenario B - you tell people you're going to change, you quit making destructive comments, and you follow up. After two months, you ask your colleagues, "How am I doing at not making destructive comments?" And they'll say, "Gee, I don't think I've heard any." Their skepticism goes down a notch. You check in at four months, then six months. Each time, they confirm you're doing better. Not only has your behavior changed, most important, their perception of your behavior has also changed. So now, if you slip up ... your colleagues will likely see it as a temporary lapse. ...

"It's much harder to change what people think of your behavior than to actually change that behavior. To change others' perception of you, first target a problem behavior, tell them you're going to change, follow up with action, and check your progress with these people at regular intervals. That way, they are made aware of the progress you've made."

"Life is good."

Unresolved Conflicts Among Senior Management

***"People work very hard to preserve their images of themselves."
- McGinn's 2nd Law of Management***

Few things are more unsettling for an organization than conflicts among senior management. The ramifications often echo across the divisions of an organization and even far down into the lowest levels of the hierarchy. What is going on here?

If you have unresolved conflicts between senior managers in your organization, I urge you to take a closer look. Senior management conflicts can be very costly:

- When senior managers clash, their underlings and supporters play out the dynamics, often with little flexibility or willingness to accommodate.
- When senior managers lose perspective, they also forfeit their greatest benefit to you, their clear judgment.
- When you become referee, you can get caught in an enormous "time-suck" with win/lose dynamics.
- When personalities - not strategy - rule decisions, the criteria and evidence are often distorted in ways that make output sub-optimal.
- When conflict persists, time is wasted, frustration increases, and morale slips across the entire team.

Freud is alleged to have said, "Sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar." meaning that sometimes, things are just what they appear to be on the surface - for example, just a simple clash of personalities. When a senior management conflict remains unresolved, however, it may represent something deeper. Here is a classic diagnostic tool I start with:

- Is it a "simple" relationship problem stemming from history, a specific incident, a mismatch of styles or values, or personal insecurities? If so, individual or paired coaching can help. Defensiveness is a primary human dynamic, even at senior levels. (See McGinn's 2nd Law.)
- Is the relationship issue secondary to procedural problems? For example, do organizational processes, such as unclear or overlapping approval processes, incomplete communication loops, or misaligned resources create conflicts and raise frustration? If so, I start there. It is necessary to repair these before relationships can have a chance to improve.
- Do procedural problems, themselves, stem from role ambiguity or conflict? Is authority shared? Is accountability clear? Who has control of resource allocation? At the senior level in complex organizations, these things are always shifting because of the inherent conflicts between staff and operational responsibilities. This is an area ripe for assistance. We start by clarifying trade-offs and ensuring that design supports intentions.
- Finally, do role issues reflect goal problems? Whenever there is misalignment or conflict over goals - as if often true in times of change or extreme financial challenges - the symptoms show up in each of the other three levels. The resolution must start at the top with strategy and alignment with talent and structure. Coaching must be done in context.

For more, check out my Laws of Management on my website, which include many practical principles for managing teams and conflict. Or give me a call to discuss. Unresolved conflicts among senior management are one place where outside help can be a lifesaver. Don't rely on the hope that "*Maybe it will go away.*" It won't.

See Also Sidebar and Next Page.

Managing Senior Management Conflict – Case Examples (details altered to preserve confidentiality)

A major west coast regional retailer had as members of its management team, executives both from the west coast

parent and a comparable east coast organization. The west coast executives were mainly in the buying operations while the east coast executives ran the facilities. They clashed on strategy, retail philosophy, and management style. Dealing with conflict took place on all four levels from page 1. I served as a 'translator' helping executives see value in the alternative perspectives of their counterparts. We looked at the incentive compensation package that rewarded buyers w/o considering the impact of sales discounts, but penalized store managers for those cuts. We recruited new merchandisers with a greater sense of business in addition to fashion. I supported the CFO as he articulated the burning platform that aligned the top management team with a renewed passion for common mission. The result was improved bottom line performance with less time spent undoing the unproductive drama of clashes between the stores and buying

operations up and down the management ranks. It would not be hard for hospital executives to see parallel clashes between clinical, support, and ancillary leaders in their organizations.

In fact, in one healthcare organization, conflicts existed between clinical and non-clinical divisions and between direct clinical services and clinical support divisions among both the executives and their respective teams. Control and access to quality data were the procedural issues that exacerbated the irritating, but more modest relationship issues. Even as the relationship issues were dealt with directly, the procedural problems continued to undermine progress. Ultimately, the structure & reporting relationships were changed and roles clarified, creating the best prospect for resolving these conflicts over the long term.

In another hospital system, that was suffering severe financial challenges, a physician was installed as CEO with a mandate to turn the organization around. Relying on his CFO as his right hand person, he took control and directed a rapid series of actions that returned the system to the black but left a split between the CEO and CFO

and most of the rest of the senior team. The sr. executives became passive in a way not consistent with either their levels of native talent or their experience. As they worked on urgent time-limited strategic issues, their passivity was frustrating and detrimental to them, to the CEO, and to the organization causing the CEO and CFO to become even more abrupt, demanding, and marginally communicative. For resolution, the situation required clearer leadership roles, assignments, and accountability for all members of the senior team.

A new CEO in a hospital member of another health system was hired to rebuild after his predecessor moved on leaving an overbuilt but under-resourced top management structure. An assessment revealed minimal direct conflict but little evidence of mutual confidence or expectations of success. Support for organizational initiatives was present,

but fragile. Top management and their divisions worked primarily in silos. With a new CEO in place and the expectation of at least some restructuring in the senior management ranks, team building and training were obvious starting points. However, as much as the assessment pointed to problems with roles, procedures, and relationships, the strongest lever for success was the development of a unified vision strongly articulated by the CEO. More than any other starting point, this would reengage the energies of the leadership team and provide the context for building bridges and integrated systems among the silos.

As I commented on page 1, conflicts among sr management are one place where outside help can be a lifesaver. Don't rely on the hope that "Maybe it will go away." It won't.

"Diverse backgrounds, experiences, thinking styles and decision-making approaches improve [group] deliberations. Particularly in a rapidly changing environment, a board and management team that have multiple talents and perspectives have much greater adaptive capabilities than do homogeneous teams. ... However, diversity also leads to challenges. It is much more difficult for a diverse group of people to align with a common vision. Arriving at consensus takes more time and effort. Such a group will confront unexpected conflicts and miscommunications. People on a diverse team are more apt to misread others' intentions and misconstrue their actions. Such groups can expect a higher degree of interpersonal tension. ... Indeed, that is why so many people, who know better, nevertheless seek out others similar to themselves.... It is much more comfortable to work with like-minded people whose lifestyle and priorities are similar. It is easier to achieve quick agreement than it is to struggle through an intense dialogue with others who don't see the world in the same way." – From Peter McGinn "Making the Case for Conflict"

For more information, see <http://www.leadershipimpact.com>

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