

# Give Yourself A Chance

The stories that we tell about ourselves can turn into traps.

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

"I am a terrible listener. I've been told that for years. People at work tell me I'm a bad listener. So does my wife. I guess that's just the way I am."

It's amazing how often I hear otherwise brilliant leaders make counterproductive, stereotypical comments about themselves.

The good news is that almost all the leaders I meet have quit making stereotypical comments about race, sex, or ethnic origin. The bad news is that we still make these self-limiting comments about ourselves.

You've surely heard them. Maybe you've used them to describe yourself:

2 "I'm impatient!"

2 "I'm always behind."

2 "I always put things off!"

We often talk about ourselves as if we have permanent genetic flaws that can never be altered.

Our personal stereotyping may originate from stories about us that have been repeated for years--often from as far back as childhood. These stories may have no basis in fact. But they can set low expectations that produce self-fulfilling prophecies, which seem to prove that our negative expectations were correct.

I'm a good example of this. I was brought up in a small town. Growing up in Valley Station, Kentucky, I might naturally have become involved in cars, tools, and mechanical things. My dad had a two-pump gas station. Many of my friends liked to work on cars and race them on weekends at the local drag strip.

As a child, however, I gained a different set of expectations from my mom. Almost from birth, I was told, "Marshall, you are extremely smart. In fact, you are the smartest little boy in Valley Station." She told me that I wasn't just going to go to college--I could go to graduate school! She also said, "Marshall, you have no mechanical skills, and you will never have any mechanical skills for the rest of your life!" (I don't think she wanted me to pump gas, change tires and work on cars at the service station.)

How did these expectations affect my development? I was never encouraged to work on cars or be

around tools. (As a teenager in the 1960s, I thought a universal joint was something that hippies smoked.) Not only did my parents know that I had no mechanical skills, my friends knew it. When I was 18 years old, I took the U.S. Army's Mechanical Aptitude Test. My scores were in the bottom two percentile for the entire nation! In other words, I was soundly defeated by random chance.

Six years later, however, I was at UCLA, working on my PhD. One of my professors, Dr. Bob Tannenbaum, asked me to write down things I did well and things I couldn't do. On the positive side, I jotted down, "research," "writing," "analysis," and "speaking." (In other words, I wrote, "I am smart.") On the negative side, I wrote, "I have no mechanical skills. I will never have any mechanical skills."

Bob asked me how I knew I had no mechanical skills. I explained my life history and told him about my dismal showing on the Army test. "How are your mathematical skills?" he asked. I proudly replied that I had scored a perfect 800 on the SAT math 1 achievement test. Bob then asked, "Why is it that you can solve complex mathematical problems, but you can't solve simple mechanical problems?" Then he asked, "How is your hand-eye coordination?" I said that I was good at pinball and had helped pay for my college expenses by shooting pool, so I guessed that it was fine. Bob asked, "Why is it that you can shoot pool, but you can't hammer nails?"

Suddenly, I realized that I did not suffer from some sort of genetic defect. I was just living out expectations that I had chosen to believe. At that point, it wasn't just my family and friends who had been reinforcing my belief that I was mechanically hopeless. And it wasn't just the Army test, either. I was the one who kept telling myself, "You can't do this!" I realized that as long as I kept saying that, it was going to remain true.

The next time you hear yourself say, "I'm just no good at . . ." ask yourself why not. The next time you're coaching someone, and he or she says, "I'm just no good at . . ." ask them why not.

If we don't treat ourselves--and the people around us--as if we have incurable genetic defects, we can get better at almost anything we choose. Why not?