

#3 Playing Favorites

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

There's a reason I devote so much time and energy to identifying interpersonal challenges in successful people. It's because the higher up you go in the organization, the more your problems are behavioral. You're smart, you're up-to-date, you know the technical aspects of your job, but often you may lack some important people skills and it's hindering your success.

I've reviewed hundreds of custom-designed leadership profiles. Typically, these documents describe leadership behaviors the organization desires, and include such important items as "helps people develop", "values different opinion", and "avoids playing favorites". I have never seen "effectively sucks up to management" on one profile. Then why does so much sucking up go on?

The simple answer is: We can't see in ourselves what we can see clearly in others. You're probably thinking, "It's amazing how leaders send out subtle signals that encourage subordinates not to critique and to exaggerate their praise of themselves and the organization. But, of course, this doesn't apply to me.

You might be right: but how do you know you're not in denial?

Here's the litmus test. I've done this test with thousands of leaders in groups worldwide and it's nothing if not illuminating. How many of you own a dog that you love? In the groups big smiles cross the executives' faces and they wave their hands in the air. They tell me their dogs' names, beaming with love. Then I ask them, "At home, who gets the most attention when you get home? Is it (a) your husband, wife, or partner; (b) your kids; or (c) your dog? More than 80 percent of the time, the winner is the dog.

I then ask the executives if they love their dogs more than their family members. The answer is always a resounding no. My follow up question: "So why does the dog get most of your attention?"

The replies are all the same: "The dog is always happy to see me." "She never talks back." "He gives me unconditional love, no matter what I do." In other words, the dog is a suck-up.

If we aren't careful we can wind up treating people at work like our dogs: rewarding those who heap unthinking, unconditional admiration on us. What behavior do we get in return? A whole lot of people who know how to suck up.

The problem with encouraging this behavior is twofold. 1) If everyone is sucking up to you, who is doing the work? And 2) if there are people doing the work, you're favoring the wrong people! Leaders can stop encouraging this behavior by first admitting that we all have the tendency to favor those who favor us. To combat this, we should rank our direct reports into four categories:

1. How much do they like me?
2. How much are they like me?
3. What is their contribution to the company and its customers?
4. How much positive personal recognition do I give them?

What we're looking for is whether the correlation is stronger between 1, 2, and 4 or 3 and 4. If we're honest with ourselves, our recognition of people may be linked to how much they seem to like us rather than how well they perform. This is the definition of playing favorites. This quick self-analysis won't solve the problem, but it does identify it. And this is where change begins.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith was selected as the #1 Executive Coach in the World by GlobalGurus.org, and one of the 10 Most Influential Management Thinkers in the World by Thinkers50 in both 2011 and 2013. He was also selected

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