

#7 "That is Great But ..."

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

The higher up you go in your organization, the more you need to make other people winners and not make your job about winning yourself. This is a hard concept for people who like to win to grasp. The more successful you become, the more helping others win is how you win!

For those in leadership positions, this means closely monitoring how you hand out encouragement and how you "help" others improve. If you find yourself saying, "That is great..." and then dropping the other shoe with a tempering, "BUT" stop yourself before you speak. Take a breath and ask yourself if what you're about to say is worth it. In most cases it isn't. If you really want to succeed and encourage others to do the same, try stopping at "great!"

This is a challenge even for those who have acknowledged they do this and think they are past it. Let me share a little story with you. A few years ago, I taught a class at a telecom headquarters. One of the men in my class mocked me when I mentioned this problem that so many of us have with "That is great, BUT..." He thought it was easy not to use the words. He was so sure of himself that he offered \$100 for each time he used these words. I made a point of sitting with him during our lunch break. I asked him where he was from, and he replied Singapore.

"Singapore? I said. "That's a great city!"

"Yea," he replied, "it's great, but..."

He caught himself immediately, and reached into his pocket for cash, saying, "I just lost \$100, didn't I?"

That's how pervasive this urge to win can be. It creeps into our conversations even when the discussion is trivial, even when we should be hyperaware of our word choices, and even when it might cost us \$100.

That was a description of the lighter version of those possessing this bad habit. Those who have the more serious version are even more harmful and discouraging. We all know negative people. My wife calls them "negatrons". These are people who are incapable of saying something positive or complimentary to any of your suggestions. Negativity is their default response. You could walk into their office with the cure for cancer and the first words out of their mouth would be, "Let me explain why that won't work."

This is the telltale phrase of negativity. It's emblematic of a need to share negative thoughts, even when they haven't been solicited. "Let me explain why that won't work," is different from adding value—because no value is added. It's the big, bad brother of "That is great, BUT..." because rather than hiding our negativity under the mask of agreement, it is pure unadulterated negativity under the guise of being helpful.

As with "That is great, BUT..." we employ "Let me explain why that won't work" to establish that our expertise or authority is superior to someone else's. It doesn't mean that what we say is correct or useful. It's simply a way of inserting ourselves into a situation as chief arbiter or senior critic.

If you think one or both of these phrases might be your mode of negative operandi, I'd advise you to monitor your statements the moment someone offers you a helpful suggestion. Paying attention to what you say in response to their ideas is a great indicator of how you come across to people. If you find yourself frequently saying, "That is great, BUT..." you know you need to take a breath, pay attention, and stop yourself at "great"!

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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