



# Marshall Goldsmith

World #1 Executive coach and author of 'Mojo: How to Get It, How to Keep It, How to Get It Back If You Lose It'

2020-09-24

<https://predictablesuccess.com/marshall-goldsmith/>

**Note:** *This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and understanding. There may still be grammatical and spelling errors,*

**Les McKeown:** Well, welcome to the latest in the Predictable Success podcast series in which we interview people who have achieved Predictable Success in their own chosen fields. I'm Les McKeown, president and CEO of Predictable Success. And today I'm delighted to be joined by Marshall Goldsmith. Marshall needs little introduction here at Predictable Success. Not only has he been a great supporter of my own book, he's one of the world's leading executive coaches, the author of 28 books, and he's appeared multiple times in just about every best seller list, except those for diet books, so far. Anyway, Marshall teaches executive education at Dartmouth's Tuck College, advises CEOs of many major organizations, and is widely recognized as one of the 15 most influential business thinkers in the world. His most recent book, "Mojo: how to get it, how to Keep it, how to get it Back if you Lose It" has just been published.

Les McKeown: And we're here to talk about it. Welcome Marshall.

**Marshall Goldsmith:** Thank you very much for inviting me.

Les McKeown: Marshall, as I said in the intro, most of the folks listening are going to be very well aware of your work, but they're not going to really know too much about your back story. And I'd love if you'd just take a minute before we get into 'Mojo' to tell us a little bit about how you got to where you are today. You're a multiple bestselling author, global executive coach. What was your path to this point?

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, you know, I was a college professor and I met a very famous man named Dr. Paul Hersey, H E R S E Y. He was the highest paid consultant, probably in the world, in our field. He got double booked - and I followed him around. He was kind enough to teach me what he did.



Marshall Goldsmith: I was so impressed with his work. I followed him around and sat in on his seminars and used his material and teaching classes. One day he got double booked and he said, can you do what I do? I said, I don't know. He said, It'll pay a thousand dollars for one day. I was making \$15,000 a year. I said, Paul buddy, sign me up. I did a program for the Metropolitan Life Insurance company here in New York city where I am now. I turned out to be the number one ranked speaker in a two week program. They were incredibly angry when I showed up and happy when I left. They called him back and said, send Marshall back again. Paul said, do you want to do this again? I said, Paul, I'm your man. So I got into this business. Coaching was also by accident.

Marshall Goldsmith: I met a CEO of a big company and he said, I got this young guy working for us. Young, smart, dedicated, hardworking, driven to achieve, creative, entrepreneurial, stubborn. Now, he said, it'd be worth a fortune to me if I could turn that guy's behavior around. I heard the word fortune. I said, maybe I could help. He said, I doubt it. I said, maybe I can help him. He said, I don't think so. That's what I came up with. My idea. So I'll work with him for a year. If he gets better, pay me. If he doesn't get better, it's free. What did the CEO say? 'Sold!' Since then all of my work in coaching has done on the pay for results basis. I don't get paid a cent until the end of the project and only by clients who achieve positive longterm measurable change.

Marshall Goldsmith: So that's how I got into that. How I wrote the book Mojo, the backstory was during these programs at my house with retiring executives where we talk about 'what are you going to do the rest of your life'? And yeah, they don't have anybody to talk to. It's kind of intriguing. And five factors matter: Health. I'm probably not going to change that. Wealth, and they have plenty of that in the United States over \$80,000 a year - it doesn't make you happier anyway. Relationships, which are critically important. But I talked about that in my previous books. And then the only two things that matter in life are happiness and meaning. So I really was focused on what is the definition of a successful person. And assuming you have good relationships, you're healthy and you have enough money to make it through all that matters is, are you doing what makes you happy?

Marshall Goldsmith: And are you doing what's meaningful for you? And unlike my other books, which were focused on interpersonal relationships, this is intrapersonal. No one can find happiness for you, but no one can define meaning for you, but you.

Les McKeown: What was the flex point, Marshall that made you begin to look at the intrapersonal issues?

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, I'm a Buddhist, I've been a Buddhist for years. So a lot of the book, 'Mojo' is it's really a Buddhist book. By the way I called Buddha. And I said, Buddha, is it okay if I use all your material in this book? He said, fine. I said, do I have to send you any commissions He said, no, what the heck just knock yourself out. They said it was perfectly okay. So the book is,



it's largely a Buddhist book. Well, by the way, somebody did say 80% of all self help books are just recycled Buddhism.

Marshall Goldsmith: So, you know, the book is largely a Buddhist book and there are many schools of Buddhist thought. I'm a member of a very simple school. It just basically says find happiness and contentment now. So if you were to summarize it, the core message of Mojo - what's right at the very heart of what it's saying, is find happiness and meaning. Mojo is that positive spirit towards what you're doing now, that starts from the inside and radiates to the outside. And it's the simultaneous experience of happiness and meaning. What we found in our work is, we look at the way you spend our life. My daughter, Dr. Kelly Goldsmith is a professor now at Northwestern. So she and I did this research. And, we did this research, looked at happiness and meaning, and we asked people, various categories.

Marshall Goldsmith: The first category was called surviving - low amounts of happiness and meaning. The second activities were put into the category of sacrificing. It's meaningful but doesn't make me happy. The next one is stimulating. It's happy. It makes me happier. It's fun. It's just meaningless. Then another category is sustaining, which is moderate amounts of happiness and meaning. And then the final category is succeeding where you're engaged in behavior that makes you happy and is meaningful. In our work the results of our research were amazing. We had a database of over 3000 people. People had experienced high amounts of happiness and meaning at work tended to be the same people that experienced high amounts of happiness and meaning at home. People who were miserable at work tended to be miserable at home. What we showed is that your experience of happiness and meaning there's a lot more, probably more to do with who we are than what we're doing. And a lot of it is not coming from the outside. None of it's coming from the inside.

Marshall Goldsmith: What did you discover, Marshall, for yourself? And explore those thoughts a little bit on what gives you happiness and meaning?

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, I do three things: I love my job by the way. And I know my retirement date it's called dead. No one has ever made it. You mentioned that top 15 thinker list, right? Well, there were actually 50 people on the list and I can guarantee you, Number 1, that I was probably one of the younger members of the list. And I'm 61 years old. Number 2, of those people on that list, how many those people will ever retire? I can help you. Zero. That's how it was with Peter Drucker. He never retired. Francis Hesselbein my good friend, she's not going to retire. Warren Bennis is 86. I think he's not going to retire. Well, yeah, we all have the same retirement date, dead, you know, retire when we die. What am I going to do? Play crappy golf with old people at the country club, eating chicken sandwiches and talking about who I used to be? In gallbladder surgeries all day? It really doesn't sound like that's much fun for me.

Marshall Goldsmith: So, I think what's important is for me, I do three things. First I teach classes. That's actually what I love doing the most. I love speaking and teaching. That's the favorite part



of my job. That's the most fun for me. Then I do coaching. What I like about coaching is where I learn everything. I mean, you might think in coaching that I'm teaching things to my clients. I always tell my clients. I'm probably gonna learn far more from you than you ever learned from me. Right. Which doesn't bother me in the slightest. And then the third thing I do is writing. And the real thing about writing is just, that's how I impact the world. I mean, I've had a million people buy some book I wrote, and then I've had over 4 million people click on something for my website. That doesn't count blogs and other things - overall probably 10 million people read something I wrote some way or another.

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, I can't talk to that many people. So the way I reach people is through writing. So I love my job. It's great fun. I don't have to do it. I don't have a boss. So if my work isn't happy and my work doesn't make me happy. If it's not meaningful, whose fault is it? Look in the mirror. I'm an idiot.

Les McKeown: You say in 'Mojo' that our default reaction in life is inertia.

Marshall Goldsmith: That's right. Our default reaction in life is not to experience happiness. Our default reaction to life is not to experience. Meaning our default reaction is to experience inertia. We all tend to do what we've been doing, go where we've been going, be what we've been being. And one of the things I've developed is the mojo meter to help combat inertia. I love the idea of the mojo meter.

Marshall Goldsmith: Let me give you a little background on where the mojo meter came from. I think I told you I do this daily question technique with my coach. Questions I write down every day. And every question is yes, no, or a number. And it's amazing how well this works. There's a lot of simple questions. Like, how happy were you, or how meaningful was yesterday, or there's one I've never got a perfect score on - how many times yesterday did you try to prove you're right when it was not worth it? I don't think I've ever got a zero in my whole life. I guess if I remained in solitary confinement for a day, I might get a zero, but I would probably then try to convince myself of something. It wasn't worth it.

Marshall Goldsmith: But I find this an incredibly useful process. Now, by the way, there's a guy named Dr. Atwal Gawande from Harvard Medical School. I'm going to be talking with him in a couple of weeks. He wrote a book called The Checklist Manifesto. Great book. His point is the smarter we are, and the more complicated our lives are, the more we need checklists, not less. We need them more because we're so busy. Our minds are cluttered with so much gunk. Right I think he's totally correct. I love his book by the way. It's totally consistent with everything I teach. Well now I've got the mojo meter, which is even better. Here's my problem: Every day is good. Not good enough. I lose it in the middle of the day. What matters is the mojo meter - at the end of every activity or meeting, you're asked two questions during the last hour, how happy was I or how meaningful is this. And so you've got this ongoing challenge as we go through life to maximize happiness and meaning.



Les McKeown: So what I was interested to get a sense of from you, Marshall, given your own experiences, can you build mojo over time to a point where you begin to pull away from on a permanent basis, that default tendency to inertia. So take your own arc. For example, you've written 28 books. Was there a point at which you got a breakthrough and got onto say a national stage or got a voice that was being heard that really galvanized you more or less permanently since then? Can you break the gravitational pull to inertia?

Marshall Goldsmith: Not totally. I don't think so. I, in my life, I go through periods of what I would refer to as temporary sanity. I, for example, I went to Africa in 1984 during the great famine. I watched a lot of people starve to death. When I came home, I was saying, Hmm. I said, don't complain because the airplane's late, there are people in the world have real problems that I can't even comprehend. Another time I broke my neck when I was surfing, didn't know if I'd ever walk again. When I could walk I was so happy. Well, I met with a great friend of mine recently whose wife is very sick. And looking at a relative who's very sick like she is can sometimes... he said, the sad thing is my wife was very sick. The good thing is this has made me have some perspective in life. I'm less bummed out by trivia like I used to be. Well, I would love to tell you that I've achieved some enlightened state where I don't need reminders and where I'm above all this. Not true. Hmm. How about you? You achieved that enlightened state yet?

Les McKeown: I've yet to finish the 29th book that Marshall Goldsmith's going to write!

Marshall Goldsmith: Any man that I talk to who tells me they've achieved this enlightened state, I just have one question: Are you married? The next question is, do you have children? Let's say it validates how enlightened you really are.

Les McKeown: So, you've got the great app, which is downloadable. You can get it onto your iPhone. You also did an interesting thing with the Mojo tweets. Tell us a little bit about that.

Marshall Goldsmith: Yeah. I have a whole book called 'Mojo, the Tweet Book', and you know, it's kind of fun. So, you know, my whole Mojo book has been converted into tweets.

Les McKeown: So you can re-tweet individual things. I noticed a lot of people that use Twitter, one of the things they're in effect doing, I think, is using it to build a reaction against inertia. They're bouncing off other people, they're getting little brief things that just get them reactivated and reenergized. And so here you have the whole of Mojo in retweetable fashion, which I thought was a really cool thing to do.

Marshall Goldsmith: It wasn't my idea. I'm really happy someone did it for me cause that's a lot of work.



Les McKeown: I'll have to get their details from you, Marshall, then maybe we can get Predictable Success into tweet form! Very early in the book you contrast two very different people. A guy who I think you have anonymized and called him Chuck, and then Duke Ellington. What was the message you wanted to convey in contrasting those really different stories

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, the Duke Ellington story is about a person who just loves what he does - has that fire in the soul and never lost it. And by the way, is a person who is still able to achieve relevance in today's world. The Chuck story is a guy who's job is gone and he just can't admit that he's no longer what he used to be. He's lost in, what's called a sunk cost. He just can't let it go. And if you look at it - the Chuck character - sunk costs are one of the real reasons people lose mojo. And that is because they've invested so much in being who they are, they just feel like they can't change it, but sometimes, you know, you are just doesn't work anymore and you need to be open to the fact that maybe you can change it. And by the way, one other character I talk about in the book, I don't know if you remember, is called Dennis Mudd.

Marshall Goldsmith: He's a man to put on a roof on our house in Valley Station, Kentucky. And he was the guy that gave me the inspiration for my 'pay me for results' thing, Dennis Mudd. I mean, here's a guy putting on a roof. Dennis Mudd was poor. We were poor and the roof had a leak and you know, he recruits me to help him put on the roof. Well, I didn't want to do it. I was attitudinally challenged as a young man, but you know, the guy had so much mojo, so much focus on what he was doing. He was positive and upbeat. And after a while I kind of got into it. It was hard work putting on a roof, right. The hardest job I've ever had in my life. But you know, at the end he looked at my Dad and he said, Bill, if this roof is of high quality, pay me. If not, it's all free.

Marshall Goldsmith: I looked at Dennis, but you know what I thought, this guy's poor, but he's not cheap. This guy's got class. And I thought, you know, I want to be like Dennis Mudd when I grow up, just to take that pride - so much pride in your work, that you could be completely confident about it. And, and you know what the other thing is, it's really, if you really think about the story and I thought about it after the book, it wasn't just a compliment to him. It was compliment to my father. Because what he's saying is I know you will treat me right. So that's, and you're complimenting your clients. I had heard many times about the basis for what you charge, but I'd never thought about that aspect of it. That was a compliment to them to say, we'll do this on the honor system. And I trust you. I've never been cheated my entire life.

Les McKeown: And the relevance - just to go back to Chuck for a moment or two - that resonated with me, Marshall, is that I don't know what state things were in at the point when you were writing the book, but just this year, I think there are so many people who need to get the message of not locking themselves into the sunk cost of, of what they invested in, in the past. And you know, sometimes you got to move on.



Marshall Goldsmith: Sure, sure. But at least you're someplace as opposed to no place. Correct. And people just say, well, I was so and so therefore I can't be such and such, well, you know what you were so and so, but that's gone. Right, right. Let's move on.

Les McKeown: I love this phrase that you came up with - the idea of 'nojo', tell us a bit about nojo.

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, nojo is that opposite of mojo. With mojo it's that positive spirit toward what you're doing now. And it starts on the inside and radiates to the outside. Nojo is a negative spirit. I fly in airplanes all the time. Have you seen the movie *Up In The Air*? I thought about it. I actually have 10 million frequent flyer miles on American airlines. OOh yeah. I got the card. I'm frequently confused with George Clooney.

Les McKeown: I've heard that. I believe that there was a line cut from the movie where he, he shows the card and somebody says, Oh, you've got the same card as Marshall Goldsmith.

Marshall Goldsmith: Yeah. Something like that. Yes. Well, anyway, I see flight attendants all the time. And one would be mojo, positive, motivated, upbeat, enthusiastic finds the work meaningful. Funny. the other one is nojo: Angry, cynical, bitter, negative, finds work meaningless on the same plane, at the same time with the same uniform, same company, same benefits. What's the difference? The difference isn't what's going on on the outside. It's what's going on on the inside.

Les McKeown: So you nail four main aspects of getting hold of your own mojo. You talk about identity, achievement, reputation, acceptance. Can you give us a 30,000 foot summary of those four mean?

Marshall Goldsmith: What is identity? Identity is the way we define ourselves. If mojo is that positive spirit toward what you are doing, it starts when the inside radius to the outside, who are you? I talk about where does our identity come from? Is it remembered, reflected, programmed or created? I talk about the importance of creating identity. And I mentioned the rock star Bono. I had dinner with him one night. He is a great case study of a guy who's done a wonderful job of creating a new identity for himself in a way that's not easy. And how we can all create a new identity for ourselves. I talked about in my coaching I'd historically focused on helping people change behavior. Now I realize I also need to help them change identity. For example, let's say you think you're bad at giving recognition? Well, you work on trying to get better. Somebody tells you you're good at recognition. If you're not careful, you know, you're going to feel like a phony thing you say, well, that's not really me.

Marshall Goldsmith: I just acted like I was good at recognition. Cause I got that coaching. Well, there's no reason you can't be good at recognition, but you don't want to just change through behavior. You want to change the way you define yourself. The second element is achievement



and I talk about achievement from two perspectives. One perspective is the more normal perspective - is what am I bringing to the task? Motivation, ability, understanding confidence or authenticity. And if you bring those two tasks, you're probably gonna do a great job.

Marshall Goldsmith: The second element I talk about is what does the task bring to me, is this task, make me happy. Is it meaningful? Do I find the task rewarding? Am I supported? Am I grateful for the opportunity to do this task? And really I've come to the conclusion. Achievement is not just what we do for the world. It's also what does the world do to us. My daughter, Kelly and I did a survey where we looked at people's definition of happiness and meaning in life.

Marshall Goldsmith: What we found out is nobody can define happiness or meaning for you. For you, for example, gardening, for some people gardening is low unhappiness and low and meaning some people it's high on happiness and high on meaning. Well, there's nothing inherently good or bad about gardening. It's just, what does it mean to you. Then the third element I talk about is reputation and reputation is basically what I do as a coach. In essence, what I'm doing is coach is helping people change their reputation. And I talk about changing the way other people perceive us, which is by the way, much harder than changing our behavior. So I talk about why reputation is important. We have a fun test on the reputation section called the brain pill test. Now you can tell me what you do. Let's assume you take this pill tomorrow. You take the pill. You're instantly going to be 10% smarter, but the world is getting to see you as 20% dumber. Do you take the pill?

Les McKeown: It's just such a great question.

Marshall Goldsmith: Well, what do you think? Would you take this pill?

Les McKeown: I'd like to think that I would, but I think that's because I've learned so much from good folks like you, and I think it comes very much to the heart of that point that you made already here. Am I prepared to not be seen to be right? Because it's not necessary, but if you actually handed it to me, Marshall, I just don't know.

I like to think : I wouldn't. I would not take the pill. The reason I would not take the pill is my job is to help other people achieve positive, long term change in their behavior. Right. I take the pill. And I'm seen as 20% dumber, I'm not going to be good at it. Right. So I wouldn't take the pill. Other people would, it's neither good nor bad, by the way. It's a great question. One woman said, I'm an artist. I don't really care what other people think.

Les McKeown: Right. Well, I'd take the pill, you know, God bless her.

Marshall Goldsmith: Right, right. So it just helps you to think about what does reputation mean to you. To me, reputation is important because if I don't have credibility, I wouldn't be able to do what I do, which of course was at the core of Bono's issue when he wanted to move into the



charity work, because his reputation needed to be shifted as well as his behaviors. And I talked about it was hard to change his reputation because a lot of people have tried to make that transition from celebrity to charity and he's just been laughed at. And then the final element is, acceptance. And again, that's the more Buddhist part of the whole book. It's, you know, learning to accept what is is somethin. Peter Drucker taught me. I mentioned a couple of times in the book that almost nobody gets.

Marshall Goldsmith: And if they just get that simple point, they have a better life and they make a bigger difference. What is the simple point? Every decision in the world is made by the person who has the power to make the decision, make peace with that. Not the smartest person, the best person or the right person or a good person it's made by that person. Right Once we make peace with this seemingly obvious point, it's amazing how much better life gets. And we dropped this, you know, poor me. I'm a victim, isn't it awful. Or what I call the lost in logic problem. Where we just sit there and talk about things that are not logical. Life isn't logical. Since when does it ever been logical I mean, have you ever said to yourself, I bet. Have you ever said to yourself, I'm amazed that someone at that level... followed by '...is weird, crazy or irrational'. Have you ever said those words?

Marshall Goldsmith: I'm going to point out how ridiculous these words are. Are you ready? Have you ever read a history book in your life? Yes or no? Yes. In the history of the world and most people quote at that level with status and money, have they mostly been women or men? Men. Old or young? Older. If there is there anything in the history of the world, it indicates that if you take a bunch of older men and give them lots of status, money and power, they will act incredibly sane and rational. Did you read that book? I have not got that book. There is no book. Book was never written. We talk about the world we live in is supposedly people with power is supposed to be saying and rational and logical. What would lead you to believe that?

Les McKeown: Well, one of the things that personally is intriguing me, Marshall, and I'd love to get your view on, is the work that we do at Predictable Success - as you know, it is mostly with organizations and organizational growth. Do you think that organizations, groups, teams can develop mojo or is it just the sum of the parts?

Marshall Goldsmith: I think they can. I am not an expert on macro level things. My area of expertise is micro level. I help individuals achieve positive longterm change in behavior for themselves, or maybe even at the level of a team, but that's about it. And as I've grown older, I've become increasingly simpler. I used to be a college professor. I was a Dean. I was a young gung ho PhD college professor, Dean, what was my goal? Teach people everything. I've now worked with 120 major CEOs around the world.

Marshall Goldsmith: What's my goal? Teach people anything. I'm a realist in my older years, and I think it's great that other people are trying to do massively big things with the world. But for me, I'm just trying to help a few people have a little bit better lives right now. I pretty much left



it at that. Nothing. If I do that, what the heck that's done pretty well. That's about it for me. I set that bar pretty low. It's a fair result.

Les McKeown: As we move towards a close, in writing the book, did you learn anything about yourself that surprised you?

Marshall Goldsmith: I think the one thing I learned about myself that also applies to the world is the importance that all of this has not just for ourselves, but for other people, it just dawned on me if I act miserable and you're with me, what's the message. Not just about me, but about you. You bummed me out, right Or let's say, I act like what I'm doing with you is meaningless. What's that message it sends to you. You're not important. And I think what we often don't do - back to the mojo term - it's moving to think about this in terms of common human courtesy, the people who were always miserable and bummed out and angry and upset, what message that's sent to the people they love. Right The message is, well, you must not make me real happy. What message is sent to our children. Our parents, it's a terrible message or coworkers. The reason to do this is not just for ourselves, but for all the people we love.

Les McKeown: So what's next, Marshall, what are you working on now?

Marshall Goldsmith: I'm working on my next book. I've always, you know, thinking of a new one. I'm thinking of this new book called simple suggestions. That work, simple suggestions. That work. Yeah. And in the introduction, I say this is not transformational. It has no new buzzwords. You may have heard all of this before. there's nothing new here. These are actually simple, tried and true things that work.

Les McKeown: Have you been keeping a sort of collection of those over time?

Marshall Goldsmith: I have been. I have been. So I was thinking about, write a book about that. That'd be great. It's just simple as simple. Cause you know what I found out as I've grown older, that's what my clients like, you know why they don't have time for complicated things. I could give them complicated things, but they can't even remember it. By the way everybody, everybody talks about ADD - that term, how bad it is. If it's so damn bad, how come 80% of my CEO clients are chronically afflicted with this?

Les McKeown: That's right. It's become almost a badge of honor. Well, Marshall, I really appreciate you making time for us. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for giving us a great insight into what is behind the book. We're giving a copy of the book away to anyone who's going to leave a comment on the screen here, where they're listening to this and I've just enjoyed the book as I have done with so many of you are so much and I'm very grateful that you've had time to join us. Marshall.

Marshall Goldsmith: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it.