

THE CIRCLE OF ENGAGEMENT

by Marshall Goldsmith

In my thirty-five years as an executive coach, I've worked with some of the world's most influential leaders. One thing most of us have in common with my highly successful clients: we like to believe we're in control.

But too often, we fail to understand how powerfully we are shaped by forces outside our control, as I argue in my recent book, *Triggers: Creating Behavior That Lasts: Becoming the Person You Want to Be*.

A trigger is any stimulus that reshapes our thoughts and actions. In every waking hour we are triggered by people, events, and circumstances that have the potential to change us. Our environment is the most potent triggering mechanism in our lives—and not always for our benefit.

If there is one "disease" that I'm trying to cure in my book, it revolves around our total misapprehension of our environment. We think we are in sync with our environment, but actually it's at war with us. We think we control our environment, but in fact it controls us. We think our external environment is conspiring in our favor—that is, helping us—when actually it is taxing and draining us. It is not interested in what it can give us. It's only interested in what it can take from us.

That doesn't mean we have to be its victims. In fact, I am a great believer in free will and self-determination. But I also believe that we have to appreciate the effects of our environment on our behavior if we truly want to be in control—making conscious choices about the behaviors that affect us and those around us. That's how we become the persons we want to be.

Awareness and Engagement

But how do we do that? If the environment is so powerful, how do we master it? I argue that structure is key, and in my book I offer several types of structures that have been proven to work, both for my clients and for me. Here I focus on two additional approaches. When we train our attention on these things, we can experience dramatic improvement in both our personal and professional lives.

The first is *awareness*—being awake to what's going on around us. Few of us go through our days being more than fractionally aware. We turn off our brains when we travel or commute to work. Our minds wander in meetings. Even among the people we love, we distract ourselves in front of a TV or computer screen.

My study and practice of Buddhism have shown me how challenging—and how important—it is to remain

Adapted from *Triggers: Becoming the Person You Want to Be* by Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter (Crown Business, 2015).

“Life is available only in the present moment.”

aware. “Life is available only in the present moment,” wrote Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. When we tune out—which is so easy to do these days, thanks to the many digital distractions available to us—we live a little less fully, and we’re less able to understand the people and situations around us. Cultivating awareness is a lifelong process. (I work at it every day.)

The second approach for mastering our environment is *engagement*. We’re not only awake in our environment, we’re actively participating in it—and the people who matter to us recognize our engagement. In most contexts, engagement is the most admirable state of being. It’s both noble and pleasant, something we can be proud of *and* enjoy. Is there higher praise coming from a partner or child than to hear them tell us, “You are always there for me”? Or anything more painful than to be told, “You were never there for me”? That’s how much engagement matters to us. It is the finest end-product of adult behavioral change.

In management circles, engagement is one of those mystically idealized conditions for employees, the equivalent of an athlete being “in the zone” or an artist being in a state of creative “flow.” To human resources professionals, employee engagement is not quite the naïve vision of “Whistle While You Work” in Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—but it’s close.

A Function of Personal Choice

I have spent years thinking about and discussing the idea of engagement. A case in point: I am continually flying around the globe, and I now have more than 11 million miles on American Airlines! As a result,

I spend a lot of my time interacting with flight attendants. It has struck me many times how people with the exact same job can handle it so differently. Some are positive, professional, upbeat, and helpful, while others are cynical, recalcitrant, unhappy, and even hostile. The difference seems to me to be a function of personal choice, the willingness to take responsibility for their own engagement.

As I often remind people who take my workshops, the person who suffers the most during these interactions is not me, the customer. I frown for a minute, shrug, and go back to my book. It’s really the disgruntled flight attendant, the perpetrator of the unpleasantness, who lives with the negative consequences—from the individual’s customers, colleagues, and bosses, and from simply living in the miserable environment he or she has created.

We can choose to be aware, and we can choose to be engaged. When we do, we are in the best position to appreciate all the triggers the environment throws at us. We might not know what to expect—the triggering power of our environment is a continual surprise—but we know what others expect of us. And we know what we expect of ourselves. The results can be astonishing. We no longer have to treat our environment as if it’s a train rushing toward us while we stand helplessly on the track waiting for impact. The interplay between us and our environment becomes reciprocal, a give-and-take arrangement in which we are creating it as much as it creates us. We achieve an equilibrium I like to describe as the circle of engagement, as seen in Figure 1: Something triggers us, we feel an impulse to do something about it, we become aware of that impulse, we make a choice about how to react, and a certain behavior results. That behavior creates a new trigger, and around and around the circle goes.

The problem for most of us is that, especially under duress, we skip a couple of points in this circle, jumping straight from trigger to impulse to behavior, without awareness of what’s happening to us. Without awareness, we’re in no position to make a good or helpful choice. The behavior that results is often undesirable. Moreover, the more we

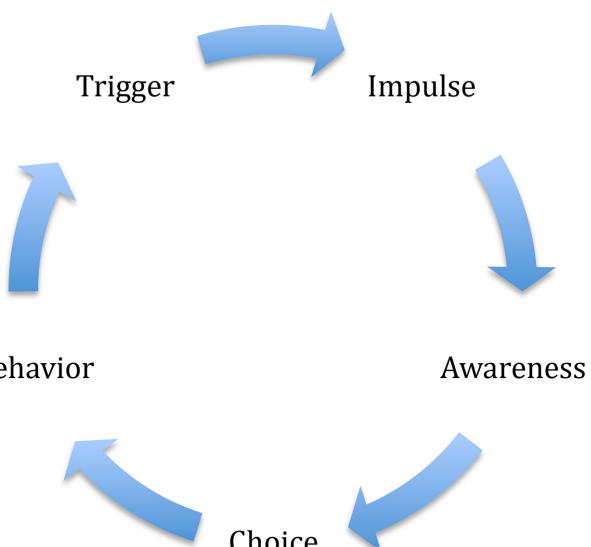


FIGURE 1. THE CIRCLE OF ENGAGEMENT

repeat this pattern, the more ingrained it becomes. Certain behaviors can begin to seem inevitable, even justified.

A former colleague of mine, whom I'll call Nancy, is an example. If Nancy got overwhelmed—by a barrage of emails, too many phone calls, or too many questions from a new assistant—she would snap. “Just give me a minute!” or “Can’t you see I’m busy?” she would shout, acid in her voice. Nancy wasn’t brusque all the time. If the situation in her office was under control, she was funny and genuinely nice to be around. But it was a different story when she was under stress.

When friends gently tried to point out that she was alienating people with her harsh reactions, she was quick to blame the stressors: her environment. “It’s these phone calls that won’t stop!” she would say. “What am I supposed to do?” She began to blame the environment for her reactions to it.

This is a frequent sticking point with my coaching clients. Very often our environments are untenable, and the stresses they put on us severe. It can be very tempting in those situations to blame external factors for our behavior. Though we cannot control the world around us, we are the ones responsible for the way we act. Even if we have horrible bosses, unfair working conditions, and terrible stress at work, we always have

a choice about how we respond to it. On a macro level, we can leave a situation we don’t like—get another job (and in some cases, that is the right choice. I have counseled some clients to do just that). If we can’t leave, or if it isn’t a good idea to leave right away, we can choose to make the best of our circumstances by refusing to let the environment shape us into a person we don’t want to be.

Despite the feedback she was getting, Nancy had a hard time understanding that her negative behavior was neither inevitable nor justified. Over time, those bad feelings she experienced every time she was under stress began to make her feel victimized. That only made her quicker to anger and more and more sure that others were to blame when she got upset.

Her coworkers got wise to what would set her off and struggled to keep her from blowing up. Her superiors weren’t interested in tiptoeing around an angry person, however, and when her manager heard that she’d screamed at an intern over bringing the wrong kind of latte, she was officially warned to improve her behavior. Instead of owning up to her shortcomings and finding a way to calm down under stress, she blamed her bosses for not understanding her unhappiness. She sought out another job and got it, which made her feel victorious for a time but ultimately didn’t help—she was just as unhappy in her new post once the honeymoon was over and the stresses began to pile up.

The real losers in that situation weren’t Nancy’s coworkers, although it wasn’t an easy situation for them. The loser was Nancy, who was unhappy at work and failed to live up to her personal and professional potential.

Cultivating awareness is a lifelong process.

From Trigger to Impulse to Behavior

But it doesn't have to work out that way. Let me give you an example of how it works using an everyday event so common (but not trivial) we barely take notice (but should). The story came to me in an email from an executive named Jim who had been in one of my graduate executive classes at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business.

Jim's wife Barbara called him at work when he was having one of those Category 4 Hurricane kind of days. Everything was going wrong: clients ticked off, division chief riding him, assistant called in sick. His wife said, "I just need someone to talk to." Evidently she was having a rough day at her job too.

The statement *I just need someone to talk to* is a trigger—a trigger for Jim to stop what he's doing and *listen*. He's not being asked for his opinion or help. He's not being asked to say anything at all. Just listen. It is the easiest "ask" of his day. He should cherish it as an unexpected gift.

But at the precise moment Jim hears Barbara's voice, it's not a certainty that he will accept the call as a blessing. A trigger, after all, leads directly to an impulse to behave in a specific way, and Jim had a full menu of impulses to choose from, not all of them desirable.

He could become even more frazzled than he was before the phone rang. In other words, use the trigger to elevate his existing emotions.

He could tell his wife that he's really swamped at the moment and promise to call her back later or discuss it at home. In other words, delay the triggering moment for a time that's more convenient for him.

He could give Barbara his perfunctory attention and multitask while she's talking. In other words, award the trigger a lower priority than his wife attaches to it—and hope she doesn't notice.

He could have self-righteous thoughts about how his wife's problems pale in both severity and significance to his own and then demonstrate in exquisite detail that she is not as miserable as he is. In other words, he could compete with Barbara's trigger and "win." He

Awareness is a difference maker.

could pursue the highly dubious strategy of proving that, once again, he is right and she is wrong.

Or he could listen.

These are all natural impulses. Who among us hasn't felt grumpy or lapsed into a full-blown tantrum while being forced to listen to someone else complain? Or tuned out a friend's whining by mentally traveling to another place? Or used another person's complaining as an occasion to broadcast and glorify our own travails?

When we lack awareness (in many cases because we are lost in what we're doing or feeling), we are easily triggered. The distance from trigger to impulse to behavior is instantaneous. That's the sequence. A trigger leads to an impulse, which leads directly to a behavior, which creates another trigger—and so on. Sometimes it works out for us; we're lucky and made the right "choice" without actually choosing. But it's an unnecessary risk that can produce chaos. Awareness is a difference maker. It stretches that triggering sequence, providing us with a little breathing space—not much, just enough—to consider our options and make a better behavioral choice.

Jim wrote the email to let me know he made the right choice. Here's his description of his first impulse at the triggering moment:

I was getting ready to point out that she wasn't the only person having problems. Then I remembered your words in class: "Am I willing at this time to make the investment required to make a positive contribution on this topic?" I took a breath and decided to be the guy who she needed to talk to. I didn't say a thing. When she finished venting, she said, "That felt good." All I could say was, "I love you."

The Reciprocal Miracle

This is the reciprocal miracle that appears when we are aware and engaged. We recognize a trigger for what it really is and respond wisely and appropriately. Our behavior creates a trigger that itself generates more appropriate behavior from the other person. And so on. This is what Jim accomplished with his wife's trigger. She triggered something thoughtful and wonderful in him, and he reciprocated by triggering a feel-good response in her. In the most positive way, each had become the other's trigger. Whether they knew it or not, they were running laps in a virtuous circle of engagement—and keeping the circle unbroken.



Dr. Marshall Goldsmith's executive coaching career spans three decades, during which he worked with more than 120 major CEOs and their management teams. In 2015 he was ranked the world's number one leadership thinker and number five management thinker by Thinkers50. He is also the million-selling author of thirty-five books. The latest, Triggers: Creating Behavior That Lasts: Becoming the Person You Want to Be (with Mark Reiter, Crown Business, 2015) achieved the top spot in the New York Times best-seller list. He served on the board of the Peter Drucker Foundation for ten years.