

# Management Tools

***Recognize and overcome self-defeating behaviors  
in yourself and others.***

**By Mark Goulston**

---

Do you know the difference between a calamity and a tragedy? A calamity—like an earthquake, tsunami, hurricane or flood—is an unavoidable disaster. A tragedy—like getting killed because you weren't wearing your seat belt, or in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet—appears preventable. That's what makes it *tragic*.

One of the greatest tragedies in your professional life is coming to the end of your career—something you often put more time into than your marriage, your family or your health—and discovering that it has been mediocre and then realizing that it was nobody else's fault. You did it to yourself. What you could have prevented, you failed to avoid because you got in your own way.

As Warren Buffet said to a University of Washington audience several years ago regarding how he and Bill Gates became so successful: "Everybody here has the ability to do anything I do and much beyond. Some of you will, and some of you won't. For those who won't, it will be because you *get in your own way*, not because the world doesn't allow you to."

Forget about excuses such as you don't have enough education, or you're never in the right place at the right time, or you're stuck in a dead-end job. How much potential success have you and your subordinates already missed out on by engaging in self-defeating behaviors such as taking things too personally, not learning from your mistakes or not preparing? In fact, how much of a positive difference would it make in your and their careers if you all could overcome the most common self-defeating behaviors?

## **SDBs as Obstacles**

What exactly is self-defeating behavior (SDB), and why do intelligent people engage in it when it is so injurious to their careers?

Self-defeating behavior is any repetitive behavior that derails you from moving forward in life. Why do you engage in this behavior? SDBs are *distress* relievers. Stress and distress are different. Stress occurs when your mental, physical, psychological and emotional faculties are under pressure from a challenge, a setback or some other adversity. Stress actually helps you to grow, sharpen your skills and perform increasingly better under pressure.

Distress occurs when the pressure in any of these areas is so overwhelming that your focus switches from pursuing your goals to seeking immediate relief. All SDBs relieve or distract you from being distressed, but derail you from achieving your long-term objectives. Don't want to buckle down and work on a project when you have a three-day weekend to do it? What harm could it cause to save it until the last day?

Self-defeating behavior hurts you in more ways than you know. Your competitors who manage or deal more effectively with distress pass you by. As superiors lose faith and confidence in you, as well as respect for you, promotions and pay raises also pass you by. Since others depend on what you do, you become the weak and resented link in the chain. You sacrifice energy by having to concoct excuses to give your superiors and co-workers. Then you bludgeon your self-esteem by feeling embarrassed, foolish and ashamed.

Where does self-defeating behavior begin? No doubt temperament and family genetics play a role—the *nature* of personality. But *nurture* plays an equally important role. Throughout childhood you are constantly stepping into the unknown—from sleeping through the night to sleepovers, from taking your first step to starting your first day in nursery school, from attending primary and secondary school to going away to college. When those steps go well, you feel vital, vigorous and master of your own fate. But when you step and fall flat on your face, you're stunned, confused and fearful. When your negative responses to those setbacks repeat themselves, they become hardwired into self-defeating behavior.

## SDB in the Workplace

The most obvious manifestation of SDB in the workplace is that goals are repeatedly set and *not* met. Productivity, results and growth come to a standstill or decline. Even more destructive to the company is when solidly performing people—those without SDBs—feel frustrated by those who do engage in SDBs and these high performers leave the organization.

Do you or your employees engage in SDBs that impede productivity and success? The following are common SDBs in the workplace:

- **Procrastinating.** This impairs your performance and causes others who depend on you to do your work in a timely manner to resent you. Few things impair your reputation and your chances for promotion or better pay more than procrastination.
- **Not delegating.** To get ahead, you often take on increasing responsibility and try to do it all yourself. You believe it's easier than training someone and preferable to letting someone else do something beneath your standard. But instead of achieving more, you end up spreading yourself too thin, and the quality of your work goes down.
- **Not listening.** When you talk much more than you listen, you are setting yourself up to be resented, rooted against and defied. Then, your subordinates and supervisors avoid seeking your input to hash out and solve problems.
- **Getting defensive.** When you take things personally that aren't meant that way, you appear easier to upset than you are to please. People start walking on eggshells around you. Then they begin to avoid you, and success avoids you too.
- **People pleasing.** If you sacrifice being respected for being liked, you won't be either. When others respect you, they want you to respect them too. When you're merely liked, too often you are taken advantage of by people who are trying to please the people they respect.
- **Fear of learning new things.** Many people harbor a secret fear that they haven't learned anything since high school and can't learn new things. They don't want to have this flaw exposed. So, they continue to avoid learning new skills and exasperate people around them.

These types of SDBs take people off track and off task, resulting in work that is of a lower quality and that isn't submitted on time. Since most people in the workplace work interdependently, the productivity of an entire group can be adversely affected if a "weak link" individual is engaging in an SDB. This can then have a snowball effect as others become frustrated and either have to confront this individual or engage in their own SDBs.

## Overcoming SDB

You are most motivated to overcome an SDB when you are lying facedown in the negative consequences of engaging in one—for example, a missed promotion, a lost client or a lost job, perhaps due to procrastination, not being prepared or some other SDB.

Rather than blame others, duck your culpability or make excuses for it, let go of your denial and anger toward others and yourself. Take out an index card, write down the following and fill in the blanks:

"If I had this to do over again, instead of what I did, I would have done \_\_\_\_\_. If I had done \_\_\_\_\_, it would have prevented these negative consequences because \_\_\_\_\_. The best way to catch myself before I engage in this SDB and then try this alternate behavior would be to \_\_\_\_\_."

When you are next in a distressed state, take the card out, read it and heed it before you engage in the same SDB.

How do you help others get out of their own way? Try this 10-step plan:

- **Step 1.** Think of the people you interact with and select individuals whose performance most directly affects you and also whose performance is most directly affected *by* you, whom we will refer to as "stakeholders." (Think ahead of time of people you interact with who also are motivated to develop themselves professionally. It would

be self-defeating to select people that you know will adamantly refuse.)

- **Step 2.** Approach these stakeholders and tell them you have committed yourself to working on your professional development and would like their assistance. (By owning up to your own SDBs and making a commitment to overcome them, you trigger “reciprocal humility” and willingness in others to do the same.)
- **Step 3.** Select no more than two SDBs that you engage in and believe most significantly hinder your performance. To help select them, seek the input of trusted friends and family members who want you to succeed. Also, select SDBs that you believe your stakeholders engage in that negatively affect you (to be used in step 9).
- **Step 4.** Ask your stakeholders if they agree with your choice of an SDB to work on or whether they would select a different behavior that you should focus on to improve the results of your working together.
- **Step 5.** Figure out with your stakeholders what your “new and improved” behavior would look like so that you and they can tell if and when you’re making progress.
- **Step 6.** Set up a regular time every two weeks to informally check in with your stakeholders to see how you are progressing, and make refinements and adjustments as needed.
- **Step 7.** Enthusiastically invite them to join you in overcoming some of their SDBs and suggest that you hold each other accountable and become each other’s stakeholders.
- **Step 8.** Ask them to select two SDBs that they would like to overcome.
- **Step 9.** Or, if they would prefer, tell them you’ll select SDBs that you see them engaging in that you believe are lowering your productivity together.
- **Step 10.** As you and they both make progress in overcoming the identified SDBs, select additional ones to work on.

## Recovering from SDB

The most important thing for you to do when you implement this plan is to be patient. Old habits and SDBs die hard. Try to keep in mind that it takes 21 days for a change in behavior to become a habit and a minimum of six months to a year for a habit to become internalized and integrated into your personality.

Take heart: Just as there are few things that make you feel worse than wasting your potential by engaging in self-defeating behaviors, few things make you feel better than overcoming them.

---

*Mark Goulston, M.D., is a psychiatrist and specialist in applied emotional intelligence. He is an assistant clinical professor at UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute (retired) and is the author of Get Out of Your Own Way at Work and Help Others Do the Same (Putnam, 2005), which provides a comprehensive list of 40 self-defeating behaviors and how to overcome them. He can be reached at [www.markgoulston.com](http://www.markgoulston.com).*