

# Lifestorming



CREATING MEANING  
AND ACHIEVEMENT  
IN YOUR CAREER AND LIFE

Alan Weiss | Marshall Goldsmith

WILEY



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# Introduction

In our culture, we are bombarded by messages that essentially say, “Change! Improve! Get better!” We’re surrounded day and night by these directives, whether they come from the diet industry, the vast trove of self-improvement literature, or the rhetoric of politicians . . . even toothpaste ads are aspirational!

Given how overwhelming these messages are, it’s tempting to simply shut them out. Who can possibly follow all that advice? But we still give it half an ear because we know, deep down, that we *could* change for the better, if only we knew how. But that’s the bedeviling question: How? Most of us try to change for years, without that change ever becoming permanent. We are left wondering how we can become the people we want to be—the people we know we can be.

The great Western disease is “I will be happy when!” When I get the money, the status, the position, the BMW, that special person. The great Western art form is something that sounds like this: “There were many people. The people were all sad. They decided to spend money. They bought a product. Then they all became happy!”

This message is called a commercial. How many of these have you seen? How many times have you been barraged by this same message? It is no wonder that we tend to look for the quick fix and the easy answer. We have been programmed, over and over again, to think this way.

Advertising presents an easy solution: Buy the product! But as anyone who has tried this strategy knows, real change is never that easy. While change is not easy, it is possible, and that's what *Lifestorming* offers. In this book, we'll guide you as you think about your goals—why you chose them, how you can achieve them, and (critically) how they can evolve over time to reflect your changing priorities.

The great fallacy of creating lasting change is that we only need to do it once. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, we never step twice into the same river. As soon as we're done achieving one benchmark, another appears before us. That's especially true in these volatile, unpredictable times, when business, technology, and just about everything else is changing at unprecedented speeds.

In this environment, character and an underlying sense of self-worth are more important than ever. Without them, it's too easy to drift away from what's really most important. In this book, authored by two of the most highly regarded executive and entrepreneurial coaches, you'll gain insight into why so many of us end up in places we never meant to go. Consider this a map for getting on the right track.

Before getting started, a little bit about us:

**Alan Weiss:** I'm an expert in human performance and growth. I began my career working globally for 15 years with Fortune 500 firms, before transitioning to working with entrepreneurs and owners of boutique firms. I've written 50 books, which appear in 12 languages and dozens of editions, including the 25-year bestseller *Million Dollar Consulting*. I'm the only nonjournalist in history to have received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Press Institute. I live in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, with my wife of 48 years, Maria, and we have two children and two grandchildren—with more expected! I'm a member of the National Speakers Association Hall of Fame® and a Fellow of the Institute of Management Consultants.

**Marshall Goldsmith:** As an executive coach and business educator, my mission is to help successful leaders achieve positive, lasting change in behavior, for themselves, their people, and their teams. In addition to advising more than 120 major CEOs and their management teams, I'm the author or editor of 35 books, which have sold over 2 million

copies, been translated into 32 languages, and become bestsellers in 12 countries. I constantly crisscross the globe to speak, teach, and coach. On one airline alone, I have more than 11 million frequent flyer miles! I'm married to the wonderful Lyda, and we also have two children and two grandchildren.

This book is written from Alan's perspective (the "I" you'll be reading about is Alan—unless otherwise noted). Marshall's point of view comes through in the approaches outlined and through some of his personal anecdotes. We have different, yet complementary, backgrounds. I (Alan) am a world authority in providing business advice to entrepreneurial leaders and individual consultants. My (Marshall's) expertise is providing behavioral coaching to leaders in extremely large organizations. While we both work with very successful people, we also work with different types of people. This book is intended to combine our knowledge in a way that can help almost anyone who has a sincere desire to achieve positive, lasting change in behavior.

No two coaches—and no two people—agree on everything, and we're no exception! But we share a fundamental belief in the power of you, the reader, to change. We know it won't be easy. We've seen powerful and influential leaders struggle with this stuff, time and again. But we also know it's eminently possible. So let's get started!



# Setting Our Own Aspirations

## **How We Can Become Programmed**

Our natural human tendency is to think of ourselves as independent and authentic—authors of our own destinies. But that’s a tall order and much tougher than it seems. Bombarded by external triggers and expectations, we can easily fall into roles and patterns established for us by other people.

Why can it be so hard to resist when someone assigns us a role and expects us to live out this role? I find it fascinating to watch this play out among professional role-players—actors. Some actors are true chameleons, morphing from one part to the next. Others seem to believe they are who they depict, developing attitudes and behaviors consistent with the characters they’ve played. Marlon Brando was famous for staying in role even when the cameras weren’t on. William Shatner often seemed to be Captain James Kirk from *Star Trek*—even when not on the *Starship Enterprise*. Remember the famous ads, still parodied today—“I’m not a doctor, though I play one on television”—in which the actor proceeded—attired in white medical

coat—to dispense health information? He was convincing because he began to believe in his own authority.

We often unconsciously become programmed to believe we are someone and then proceed to live our lives trying to fill that role. However, it's often the wrong role: not right for us, and sometimes even harmful.

For years people told me I should become a lawyer. In grammar school and high school I was told I argued well and debated effectively. At Rutgers, I majored in political science, a natural precursor to law school. I did well enough on the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) to earn a full scholarship to Rutgers Law.

There was only one problem. Over that summer, I realized I didn't want to be a lawyer. I never had dreams of working in criminal defense, or as a prosecutor, or settling estates, or refereeing divorces, or working for an organization's legal department. These are great aspirations—but they just weren't mine. I had different dreams, which initially didn't please those who wanted a legal career for me. My parents, who never had money, viewed law as a distinguished and high-earning profession. My teachers wanted it for me too. When I visited the dean of admissions to tell her to give the scholarship to someone else, she actually reached across the desk to try to grab my wrist! Thankfully, I didn't give into that pressure, and today I have a career I love.

A great many people follow their parents into a profession, even when they don't feel any passion for it themselves. A friend of mine followed his father into dentistry, believing it was a good way to make money in the medical field without becoming a physician. Although being a dentist is a great career for many professionals, it was not for him. Too late, he realized he essentially disliked pushing a high-speed drill an eighth of an inch from patients' tongues day in and day out. But by then his practice was paying for private school tuitions, his own educational debt, and all the trappings of an upper middle-class life. Trying another career at his age would have come at a tremendous cost. This conundrum isn't unique to dentistry, of course. Numerous professions represent a well-trodden path that is easier to follow than to leave.

This pattern can be also be influenced by siblings. Brothers and sisters are highly influenced by their sibs, and tend to play the same sports, or become cheerleaders, or join the band (and play the same instrument)—or do just the opposite to escape the comparisons. These are roles that have been established as successful, drawing praise from others, and creating a precedent to follow or from which to flee.

Thus, unseen by the naked eye, we, without thinking about it, may do our best to become the person we were programmed to be rather than the person who, in our hearts, we want to be!

### **Case Study**

I was coaching the former vice chair of a large financial institution. He loved helping people and wanted to be a consultant after his mandatory retirement. His face lit up when he discussed the possibility of being an advisor to other executives.

Surprisingly, he seemed very curious when I asked him if he would be interested if another vice chair position became available. He asked me if I knew about such a position, how much it paid, and the size of the organization.

When I reminded him of his previous discussion about being a consultant, he immediately changed course, thanked me, and mentioned that he had become so used to focusing on money and status that he had temporarily forgotten that he was already rich and wanted to spend the rest of this life doing what *he* most valued.

Some very prestigious jobs are actually a poor fit when you consider the applicant's true aspirations. Retiring executives or admirals might be flattered by offers of a college presidency, for example, something others might ooh and ah at. They may have a vision of a job that allows them to serve as the public face of a venerable institution, leading great discourse and inspiring younger generations. The actual work of a college president, however, may involve sparring with tenured faculty, negotiating the demands of students, and meeting

stringent fund-raising goals. Anyone who takes a job like that just because of the title and honorifics is likely to feel disappointed and betrayed. If a different person took the same job with a clear goal of improving higher education, though, she might find the role incredibly fulfilling.

## An Evolutionary Journey

We're talking about taking an *evolutionary journey* through life. A journey without a "there." Gertrude Stein coined the epithet "There is no *there*, there" when speaking of Oakland, California. But we mean exactly that. Your "there" is constantly migrating (we'll discuss metamorphosis and change in Chapter 3).

*The evolving you is not a moving target, but pursues a moving target.*

### Milepost

Be careful that your "there" is not created by someone else or some external force, such as Facebook. Your "there" can, and often should, be constantly moving as your experiences, successes, and perspective change. Our bar may well become higher and higher as we journey through life.

An initial question becomes: To what extent is your journey one of internal control, and to what extent one of external control? Do social and normative pressures have a legitimate role in who you are to become? Figure 1.1 illustrates these relationships.

We're using the following definitions:

*Control:* The power to influence or direct.

*Internal:* The power that is believed by the performers to be theirs; within their purview.

*External:* The power that is believed by the performers to be wielded by others or by random events.

When we believe that both internal and external control are low (lower left), we're merely taking a random walk. (A more graphic manner to describe this quadrant is *chaos*: complete disorder and confusion.) I'm reminded of the classic story of the drunk accosted by the bartender and told to get out, who replies, "I didn't walk in here and I'm not leaving."

Many people arise each day simply awaiting what occurs, without the intention of exerting themselves on the world. We see this in circumstances where external direction has been removed advertently or inadvertently (the leader of a group suddenly dies, or is delayed in arriving, or is having a bad day) and no one chooses to step forward into the vacuum. People mill about or drift away. Nothing productive occurs. This is much rarer among entrepreneurs, who realize (and are gratified) that they must make their own plans work, must achieve their own aspirations.

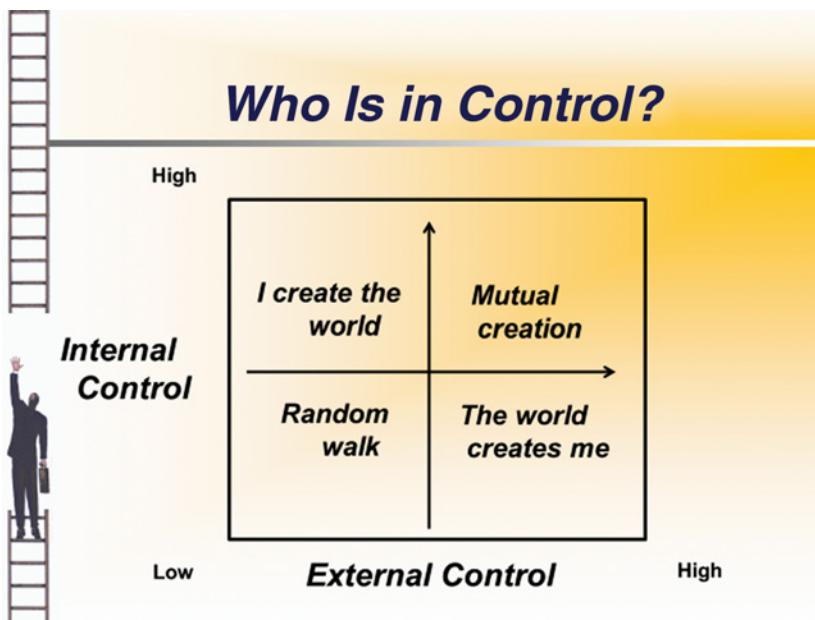


Figure 1.1 Relationship of Internal and External Control

When internal control is seen as high and external control as low (upper left) there is the belief that “I create the world.” When carried to an extreme this can lead to narcissism and imperiousness, as well as to a false belief in one’s abilities (and to being seen by others as the proverbial empty suit, or in Texas as “big hat, no cattle”).

Another version of this belief is illustrated by the classic motivational speech in which the speaker exhorts the audience to overcome fears simply by telling themselves they can or by emulating some deeply dramatic challenge that the speaker has overcome and wrestled to the ground.

One of the funniest examples of the weakness of belief in solely internal control is Bob Newhart’s classic routine of a psychologist who charges only a dollar a minute for a maximum of five minutes because his consistent advice to any dysfunctional habit or irrational belief is: “Just stop it!”<sup>1</sup>

### Case Study

I was once president of a company owned by a wealthy insurance magnate and financier. This man believed strongly in a positive mental attitude. He preached this philosophy as the route to success and the cause of his own fortune of over \$450 million.

I wondered if he had his etiology (cause and effect) mixed up: that he had a positive mental attitude *because* he had earned \$450 million in the insurance business, not vice versa. At one point I joked that if he wanted everyone to have a positive mental attitude he should give them all \$450 million.

I was fired not long after—which taught me that even if a positive mental attitude does not guarantee millions in riches, it does tend to help you keep your job.

<sup>1</sup>Bob Newhart, “Stop It,” YouTube video, OneTrueMedia.com, uploaded by Josh Huynh September 1, 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw).

Today, there is a major industry dedicated to convincing people that control of their lives is totally personal and achievable. The highly paid speakers in this industry may be thriving more than their customers. If we truly had total control over our lives, none of us would choose to get sick or eventually die.

We are great believers in positive mental attitude. We believe that helping people to become more motivated about taking control of their own lives is a noble goal. We also believe that the reality of what we can control needs to be balanced with the acknowledgment of what we cannot control.

In the bottom right of Figure 1.1 we have high external control and low internal control. In other words, the world creates and directs us, a Calvinistic sort of predestination. In more modern times this condition has been represented by B. F. Skinner, the psychologist and behaviorist who believed that human behavior could be controlled and predicted. He advocated programmed learning and similar educational practices to train people to whatever ends were desired. Skinner believed that external stimulus was more powerful than individuals' internal control.

We believe Skinner's work sheds some very valuable light on human behavior, but it falls far short of explaining all of it. While our environments are powerful, so are we. I recall hearing many years ago, but can't recall who said, "We train animals, but educate people." You can teach people to perform repetitive tasks—a feature of the training industry that sprang up in response to the world wars—but you can't train people to be enthusiastic, or motivated, or have high energy. That comes from within.

If your belief is that others not only can determine but are responsible for what you become, then you are in a position of surrender. This is the professional victim, who constantly blames the system, or "them," and feels no power. Victims have no inclination to create their own change initiatives. One of the greatest expenses for any company is absenteeism and the greatest cause of absenteeism is stress, and stress is often caused by the feeling that one has no inkling of what may happen tomorrow and no influence over it.

In the extreme case this belief is that the journey has already been mapped and the roads already paved.

This now takes us to the upper right quadrant, or high control both internally and externally—mutual creation. This quadrant represents the belief system of this book. We believe that all people can have significant influence over their own lives. We believe that we, as humans, can make a huge difference in creating our own lives, but that we are not gods. While we can make a difference in creating our lives, our environment can still play a large role in our ultimate success or failure. An innocent person being victimized by a drunk hit-and-run driver is not totally responsible for the outcome of what happened.

When we don't understand how much control we actually have in a given situation, it's easy to end up with misguided aspirations and inappropriate metrics. If we aren't careful, we can be pulled off course by going to either extreme—believing we can do everything or believing we control nothing. (For example, parents telling us that we are born winners who can do *anything* we choose—or parents telling us that we are born losers who can do *nothing* we choose.) Naively accepting their advice is forgivable in childhood, regrettable in early adulthood, and harmful in maturity.

As we become more successful, the importance of the top right quadrant grows, raising the bar still higher for responsible aspirations and metrics of improvement.

## Applying the Right Criteria

Here's a brief test on your personal metrics and norms:

1. Choose someone you consider to be a personal hero. It could be someone from personal life experience, such as a parent or teacher, or someone in the news, such as Sully Sullenberger (who landed his disabled plane in the Hudson River with no loss of life).

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