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Gurus and Go-Tos

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How to avoid getting trapped by other people's thinking.

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Gurus and Go-Tos—we all have them. These are the people we believe are profoundly sage or pragmatic or

whatever it is that we perceive may be missing or inadequate in our own lives. We all have people we believe will have a better answer than the one we will have. They may be an expert in our industry, our religion, a government, or corporate leader, a consultant, a counselor, or a psychic. The list of potential gurus is endless. We feel like we need them, and we are convinced we must heed their advice, even when it doesn't mesh with what our own intuition is telling us.

Why do we need gurus and go-to people in our lives? Is it insecurity? Is it that we enjoy and relish the idea of having a hero? What is it in our psyche that drives us to look for someone we can put on a pedestal? Perhaps there is a combination of reasons, not the least of which is that we want to learn from others and finding someone to turn to is always exciting. It seems that when there is no guru, go-to person, or a hero in sight, we look around and maybe even feel a little sad until we find one. And then when we do find one, with great joy and vigor, we begin to build the pedestal upon which that person will sit in our lives. We set it just so that the pedestal and the person on it will catch the limelight. We call our friends, family members, and colleagues and ask them to join us at the feet of our new and potentially magic guru. We quote them in articles and books and at our dinner table over a glass of wine. All is right with the world again. We have a new guru.

Over-reliance Can Lead to Failure

Of course, we are having a little fun at our own expense and over-dramatizing just a little, but we think there is truth in the concept that we often rely on someone else's opinions and ideas more—and sometimes much more—than our own. It doesn't even need to be someone famous or religious. A university student may rely too heavily on a professor. A professor may rely too heavily on a researcher. A CEO may rely too heavily on the CFO. A senior team can place a sage-like mantel on the CEO and follow him or her right over the cliff. A line leader may rely too heavily on the HR leader. An HR leader may rely too heavily on an outside consultant. An outside consultant may rely too heavily on an academic expert or prestigious business review contributor. Anyone can become caught up and even dependent upon another person's point of view, and this can lead to a surprising letdown or even failure.



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Some of the most famous tragedies of all time may be attributed to over-reliance on expert opinion. The Titanic was a premier ocean liner designed by experienced engineers, using some of the most advanced technologies and extensive safety features of the time. You know the rest of the story. One of the most interesting aspects related to the huge loss of life that provoked much outrage was the fact that the ship did not carry enough lifeboats for all her passengers and crew. For her maiden and only voyage, Titanic carried a total of 2,224 passengers and 20 lifeboats. Why? In 1907, the law required a minimum of 16 lifeboats for ships over 10,000 tons. The expert, Sir Alfred Chalmers, nautical adviser to the Board of Trade, assumed difficulty in lowering a greater number than 16 boats in any emergency. In the event of a serious accident in the busy North Atlantic sea lanes, assistance from other vessels was assumed to be close at hand. Lifeboats would be used to ferry passengers and crew from the stricken vessel to its rescuers. Full provision of lifeboats on the ship was considered unnecessary. It is often alleged that J. Bruce Ismay, the president of White Star, vetoed the installation of additional boats to maximize the passenger promenade area on the boat deck.

In the corporate world, consider Bernie Ebbers, a successful and admired businessman at one time. He had a down-home cowboy style and charmingly turned WorldCom into the nation's second-largest long-distance telecommunications company through a series of rapid acquisitions. Unfortunately, his cowboy antics left the company in the red. In 2002, the company admitted to improperly reporting \$3.8 billion in expenses, prompting Justice Department to open a criminal investigation into its business practices. Ebbers' "I had no idea what was going on" defense didn't work. He was convicted of securities fraud, conspiracy, and seven counts of filing false reports with regulators. Ebbers told jurors he never knew of the fraud and said, "I just didn't see it." It was not clear that he had committed perjury, and even if jurors believed his testimony and that he was relying on others for information, it didn't hold up as a valid defense.

In our personal lives, we often have family members, friends, mentors, and teachers who offer us advice. Following that advice aimlessly without listening first to our own inner voice can be just as tragic. We all have met someone who unhappily followed in the footsteps of a family member or took over the family business just because it's what was expected. There are times, of course, when our own sense of the situation comes to the

surface and we proceed in spite of advice to stop or retreat.

Sandra remembers going to a college professor for advice about entering a graduate program she was interested in early on in her sophomore year. She was stunned when he told her he thought she was wasting her time thinking about applying to the program. Fortunately, she carried on with her ambition to apply and finish the program. Later in her career she applied for a promotion and her manager asked her to stay in her current position, promising that more money would come. But money wasn't the driving factor for Sandra and in spite of the advice, which she normally would have taken, she applied anyway and received the position, along with a new opportunity to learn and grow.

One way to determine when to follow our latest guru's advice is to gauge the impact. Any advice that limits our potential and goes against our true interest has to be treated as suspect. We all have an inner voice along with our own experience, knowledge, and wisdom. Limiting ourselves based on someone else's opinion is a setup for failure. In fact, we all can think of someone who wasn't supposed to make it in a certain career or sport but did because of will, determination, and coaching help a few right turns along the way. They could have been stopped, and many people tried to stop them all along the way, but they pressed on. Think of the Jamaican Bobsled Team, "Spud" Webb, and the many others who were, no doubt, told to stop over and over again before they went on to become great and famous.

Listen to Your Inner Voice

Just because we have a great guru or go-to does not mean we stop thinking for ourselves. We still need to analyze the situation, taking full responsibility for our own life and actions. As we analyze the situation, we ask questions, follow our own interests, check our gut instincts, and listen to our inner voice. By checking the information we receive against our own knowledge, experience, and wisdom, we are able to make wise decisions based on good counsel and sound decision-making principles. Accepting what we are told without question makes us open to manipulation. This is not about selfishness or blocking out sound advice. It's about balance. In the long run, when we are seeking advice, we don't want to leave out the one person who has to live with the decision—us.

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Even though deep down we know they make mistakes, it's somehow surprising when a guru or one of our heroes lets us down or even screws up so badly that we no longer hold them on a pedestal. It's painful for us to lose the illusion of it all. We may encounter a leader who tells a lie, an organizational practice that crosses our values, a team so entrenched in competition and politics that it has lost sight of its common goals or any other number of personal and professional disappointments. Knowing what's important and thinking for ourselves takes courage. Sometimes we have to make tough choices even if it means disappointing our gurus and go-tos.

How to Avoid Getting Trapped?

- Find go-tos and gurus who believe in YOU.
- Ask questions.
- Listen carefully.
- Listen to your OWN inner voice ABOVE others.
- Don't blindly accept limitations others may try to impose.
- Set goals that expand your potential.
- Review the choices using good decision-making skills.
- Excel in what you do!

We are not trying to do away with gurus and go-tos. In fact, we like them and have a few of our own. They have an appropriate place in our lives, but we can't allow ourselves to become limited or trapped by other people's thinking. Our gurus and go-tos should be those individuals who expand our thinking, open doors for us, and help us realize our full potential.

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