



**Acronyms**  
are awesome!

# the **MYFABMOFA** PLAN

**Communication Strategies to Ensure Nobody  
Ever Wants to Talk to You**

*Jeff Havens*

the  
**MYFABMOFA**  
PLAN

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***The MYFABMOFA Plan:***  
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## ***Congratulations!***

Welcome! I know you didn't buy this book, because it's not for sale anywhere. You either got it at a conference, received it from a coworker, or found it in a dumpster somewhere. Perhaps somebody flung it at you from a speeding car, and perhaps you've been using it as a coaster. But thankfully you were bored enough today to open it. And for that, I congratulate you. You've just accidentally made the most amazing decision of your life.

This book is going to help you improve your communication skills – sort of. Now as I'm



sure you know, communication is an essential element in every successful industry, business, and relationship. You need to know how to do it well. But I'm going to leave that to others.

See, I don't give advice. I give permission. And I'm about to give you the permission to communicate with others exactly how you've always wanted to. I know your secret heart. I know what you *really* want to say to the people you work with every day. Which is why the focus of this book is how to more effectively...

## ***Criticize Others!***

Now I'm sure you can already tell how great this is going to be. You've been waiting for an excuse to start railing against the insufferable imbeciles you're forced to deal with every day. Or perhaps you haven't been waiting for an excuse, but you feel like you could be even better at being mean and hurtful than you currently are. And

I promise this book will help you become even more spiteful and intolerable.

It's also dimly possible that you're wondering how you can profit from criticizing other people. I don't know much about you, but it's possible that you're dumb enough to ask that question. But because I'm feeling indulgent today, here are the two biggest reasons that criticizing others can be a really, really good idea:

## ***Why Criticize Others?***

### ***I'll Tell You Why!***

1) It's fun! Hurting other people's feelings is something you've been doing since you were in elementary school, and there's no reason to stop now.

2) In case you didn't know this, the top three non-financial factors that determine a person's happiness at their job are: their relationship with

their immediate superiors; their relationship with their coworkers; and an easy commute. You'll notice that none of these things have anything to do with the specific work that's involved. Which means that in theory, if you create the proper environment, you can create a happy and motivated workforce irrespective of the work you're asking them to do – or, more importantly for our purposes, you can create a joyless and miserable purgatory for all of the people you work with. You don't control the length of their commute, of course, but the way you communicate with your colleagues, superiors, and subordinates will allow you some control over the other two. And as the immortal Meatloaf once said, two out of three ain't bad.

Your problem, if you have one – and I'm sure you do – is that you've had no system. You've been criticizing others randomly. Yours have been the efforts of an amateur, a labor of love

but hardly a scientific endeavor. This book will provide you with the system necessary to ensure that you are able to criticize others to greatest effect. I'm so excited by my system, in fact, that I've even developed my own acronym – and I'll bet you already know what it is!

## ***Acronym Time!***

I'm sure you're familiar with the acronym, which is a word or phrase that stands for other words or phrases. Acronyms facilitate the communication of common ideas and also allow people to sound more important than they are. I think we can all agree that “I need the STAR numbers ASAP, Jerry – it's TOE time” sounds a lot more impressive than “I need the standard tax and revenue numbers soon, Jerry. Time is of the essence.”

In the world of professional speaking, acronyms are extremely popular because they



provide an impressive veneer to otherwise extremely boring and unoriginal ideas. The first and least amazing of these isn't even an actual acronym; it's just a series of letters. I've sure you've dozed your way through these kinds of seminars.

## ***Laziest Kinds of Acronyms***

*(I Hate These!)*

### **The 3 P's of Success:**

Persistence, Polish, Perspective

### **The 4 W's of Customer Service:**

Attend to Find Out What They Are!

A slightly better approach to the acronym is to actually take the trouble to make your acronym into a real word. These are still thinly-veiled attempts to make ordinary ideas sound better than they really are, but they're slightly condescending and more fun to say.

# ***Almost There!***

## ***The C.A.N. Plan! The T.R.U.S.T. Approach!***

Create

Teamwork

Active

Respect

Networking!

Uothing good starts with “U”

Saskatchewan

Tylenol

But the best kind of acronym isn't a word but yet is so incredible, unique, and awesome to say that it seems like it should be. It's an attempt to improve the English language by adding a glorious new concept to our ever-expanding lexicon. Which is why I am proud, honored, and privileged to present you with....the **MYFABMOFA** plan.

Just say it to yourself. Let the linguistic perfection of those four gorgeous syllables roll off your tongue. Sounds like a lullaby, doesn't it? And what does it mean? I'll tell you what it means.

# ***The MYFABMOFA Plan!***

Make  
Yourself  
Feel  
Awesome  
By  
Making  
Others  
Feel  
Awful!

This is the pathway to joy, people. Bliss and ecstasy are all here for the taking in the MYFABMOFA plan. And I know the more I write MYFABMOFA, the more you're dying to know what the MYFABMOFA plan is. So without further adieu – without any adieu at all, actually, because I don't know what adieu is – here we go.

# ***It's MYFABMOFA Time!***

## ***Phase One***

There are two phases of the MYFABMOFA plan. The first has to deal with what I like to call 'the myth of constructive criticism.' This is a very common idea, the notion that criticism is occasionally helpful. There are actually people who think that making constructive comments about others can occasionally improve workflow, ease tensions, and increase productivity.

Ridiculous.

Seriously, have you ever said to yourself, 'You know what I could use right now? I'd really like to sit at my desk and have everybody I know file through my office one at a time to tell me everything they think is wrong with me. I'd love for them to provide me with a litany of all of my faults and flaws. That would be very constructive.'

Of course not! That sounds like a terrible way to spend time. However, this crazy ‘constructive criticism’ myth is an idea that we have, and so it’s an idea you need to exploit. Use it to your advantage.

How exactly can you do that? Simple. When you’re going to criticize another person, you need to begin with an introductory phrase that makes it sound like you’re not trying to be mean, you’re actually trying to help the person you’re about to insult. That’s how you’ll get the most pleasure out of their shock and pain. And when they complain about your unexpected and vicious browbeating, you can always hide behind the failsafe defense: “I was just trying to offer a little constructive criticism.”

What are these magical phrases? I’ll give you a few. This list is by no means complete, but they will help you get started, and I want you to see how effective they can be underneath the aegis of the MYFABMOFA model. And the nice thing



is, you've probably been using some of these for years!

Let's start with an obvious one:

## ***'No offense...'***

Let's be honest. This is a lie. You have never said, 'No offense...' without following it with something offensive. Nobody has. That's why we say it.

And it works. You can finish this sentence with whatever mean and hurtful thing you're able to dream up. And why can you get away with it? Because if the person you're talking to gets upset, it's their fault! You weren't trying to offend them, remember? They're just a little too sensitive and need to lighten up. It's airtight, my soon-to-be-critical friend. Pure genius.

And there are a lot of other phrases that can do the same. Are you ready for a brave new world of criticism? Then turn the page.

## ***Other approved MYFABMOFA phrases!***

1) ***'Don't take this the wrong way...'***

Ha. Like there's another way to take it.

2) ***'I don't mean to sound rude...'***

Oh....yeah you do.

3) ***'This isn't going to sound the way I mean it...'*** This is one of my favorites. I mean seriously,

you *know* that the words you're about to use are going to come out wrong, and you're going to say them anyway. I salute you.

4) ***'I mean this in the nicest way possible...'***

Really? Because your smile doesn't really look like a smile, you know?

You can really appreciate the power of these phrases especially when you use them back-to-

back. Don't believe me? Then go to a coworker's office and say the following:

“Hey (name of target). No offense, but nobody here really likes you. I don't mean to sound rude, but we're all hoping that you'll seriously consider early retirement. Don't take that the wrong way.”

I hope you actually did this. Just look at your colleague's face! He or she is stunned, baffled, and now wounded – the perfect trifecta. Trust me; I've used this particular combination of sentences on countless unsuspecting victims over the last few years, and I am proud to be able to admit with all honesty that I have no friends left.

Now the above phrases are good, generic, catch-alls that work anywhere. You can use them at home or at the office, much like a good coat rack. But sometimes you'll want to be more situation-specific, and in those cases, you might consider some of the following.

## ***But Wait! There's More...***

### **1) *'Now you know I love you...'***

This one's tailor-made for the family. I'm pretty sure you've said it to your spouse and children, and it's never ended with, '...so here's a cookie.'

### **2) *'I appreciate the effort...'***

No you don't. This one is ideal for your subordinates. This sentence has never, ever, ever, ever, ever, *ever* ended with a bonus.

### **3) *'With all due respect...'***

A foolproof comeback for anyone who hits you with 'I appreciate the effort...' But 'With all due respect...' is great for any business situation where you wish you could say that the person you're talking to is a complete moron.

### **4) *'This might be the alcohol talking...'***

Otherwise known as 'the weekend saver,' this

convenient phrase will allow you to say whatever you want while under the influence and then absolve yourself for any wrongdoing by blaming your hateful tirades on the pernicious influence of a few too many drinks. Never mind that alcohol has almost never made you say anything you hadn't at least thought about saying while you were sober. That's hardly the point.

5) ***'...bless your little heart.'***

A perfect ending to a perfect insult, this little gem will let you add a little Southern flavor to your MYFABMOFA. This is categorically the nicest meanest thing you can say to another person, rivaled only by '...God love 'em.' Don't believe me? 'That kid is dumb as a rock, bless his little heart.' The prosecution rests.

So, this is the first phase of the MYFABMOFA plan. You now know how to frame your criticism, how to begin or end whatever mean and hurtful



thing you're going to say. Now let's move to the second phase – the meat of the insult, the heart of the wounding. Fasten your seatbelts.

## ***It's Still MYFABMOFA Time!***

### ***Phase Two***

The second stage of the MYFABMOFA plan is actually very easy. All you need to do is remember the advice you received from every composition teacher you had in junior high, high school, and college. Your insults need to be written with the same creative, unique, and unexpected flair that was expected of your poems, short stories, and term papers. Your insults need to hit people with something they'll never see coming. That's where the true power of the MYFABMOFA lies.

I'll show you right now why originality is so important. Let's take a look at a very common insult: I don't like you. It's bland, boring, and stale, just like those crappy cookies you get on

airplanes. You've said 'I don't like you' a thousand times, and you've heard it a thousand times. And whether you're aware of it or not, repetition steals the meaning from the things we say.

***Repetition steals the meaning  
from the things we say.***

When you say 'I don't like you' to somebody, odds are they've heard it so often that the insult just rolls right off their back. It's lost its power. And you don't want that. You don't want your insults to leave people unfazed. You want your criticisms to stick. You want the hooks to dig in. That's why you need to be original.

So try these on for size. Next time you feel the urge to criticize somebody, don't say, 'I don't like you.' Say one of the following:

***1) 'Don't take this the wrong way, but I hope you contract an intestinal parasite.'***

**2) *'No offense, but if you ever had an original thought I'm sure it would die of loneliness.'***

**3) *'I don't mean to sound rude, but every time you open your mouth I want to set myself on fire.'***

**4) *'I appreciate the effort, and you're one of our best part-time workers. Too bad you're on the clock full-time.'***

Can you imagine the fun you're going to have? Can you imagine the shock and awe you'll be visiting upon your family, friends, colleagues, superiors, subordinates, and customers? I'm giggling like a schoolgirl just writing these insults, and I'm just sitting here all by myself. Imagine how much more fun you'll have when you get to say them to somebody!

Make no mistake: once you learn how to combine these two pieces of the MYFABMOFA plan together, you're going to be able to talk

to everybody – difficult coworkers, irritating officials, ticket-writing police officers, aggravating creditors, uncooperative children, and would-be assailants – confident that you'll know exactly what to say.

Now I know you might be thinking, 'I can't do this.' Perhaps you're thinking you're just not creative enough. You remember how you copied all your term papers straight off of the Internet, and you've never been good with words. Perhaps you're thinking, 'I'm only a customer service representative' or 'I'm just an analyst.' You might even be crying a little bit right now.

Well dry your tears, you giant baby. I'm here to prove you wrong. I'm here to show you that with a little bit of practice, you're going to find you have a lot more of the MYFABMOFA in you than you think.

All you need to remember is what we've already talked about. It's a pretty simple three-step process:

**Step one:** Begin your criticism with an introductory phrase designed to hide your true intentions. This could be one that I showed you, or it could be one of your own devising – whatever works.

**Step two:** Follow that with an original criticism designed to wound the person in question. This can be G-rated, R-rated, generic, specific to a particular individual – again, whatever works. As long as it's not something you've heard a thousand times or seen scrawled on a bridge somewhere, you're on the right track.

**Step three:** Have fun! This is about personal growth and fulfillment at the same time that you're hurting other people's feelings.

And before I cut you loose, I want to share with you creations of former MYFABMOFA graduates. I didn't come up with anything you're



about to read. I shared the MYFABMOFA with others, and they came up with some absolute treasures that I hope will provide you with the inspiration you need to begin your own quest for MYFABMOFA happiness.

## ***Enjoy the Wickedness!***

1) ***‘That’s a lovely outfit you’re wearing. Does it come in your size?’***

O-U-C-H. That’s a punch to the stomach if I ever heard one. Wicked and wonderful. And there are a lot of others just as effective.

2) ***‘I really like you as a person, but your parents slipped into the gene pool while the lifeguard wasn’t watching.’***

A clever take on a recycled theme.

3) ***‘Did you get a new haircut, or just an estimate?’*** Especially hilarious if you work

in construction, web development, or anything where estimates are common. I'm particularly fond of this one as it was directed at me by a 9-year old. Precocious little bugger, huh? Making fun of my appearance and the fact that I might not have \$12 to fix it. He's going to do great things someday, if he survives his adolescence.

4) ***'Don't take this wrong, but you remind me of a Slinky – not much fun to play with, but I would still love to push you down the stairs.'*** Common household objects are a great source of inspiration. Other excellent choices include dishrags, old furniture, and any brand of toilet cleanser.

5) ***'You've become so valuable around here that I don't know how we could ever do without you – but starting Monday we're going to give it a try.'*** Can you think of a better way to fire somebody? I sure can't!

6) ***'I mean this nicely, but every time I play Oregon Trail I create you and let you die of dysentery.'*** Huzzah for 1980s video game references! This one is a darling among the tech-savvy set.

7) ***'I know you're not two-faced, because if you were you certainly wouldn't wear that one.'*** You almost made your victim smile there, didn't you? Almost.

I know you're capable of greatness. Prove it to me. But more importantly, prove it to yourself. Get out there and start making everyone around you wish that you were never born. I believe in you.

## ***Focus on the Negatives!***

OK, so now you know what the MYFABMOFA plan is. Now you need to know when to use it.

The answer, of course, is often. You should never be happy with anybody else's performance, and you need to communicate your disappointment at every opportunity.

Fortunately, there's actually a formula we can follow here.

Some of you might be familiar with the work of John Gottman, a psychology professor at the University of Washington who published a book in 1995 called *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. In that book he claims that the ideal ratio of positive to negative communication is 5-to-1. In other words, for every critical, demeaning, constructive, or other imperfect thing you say to another person, you will eventually need to say five nice things to offset it. Marriages – and by extension any relationship – that have a 1-to-1 or 2-to-1 ratio are almost certainly doomed to failure.

To test his hypothesis, Gottman videotaped 15 minutes of conversation between several

hundred randomly selected married couples. He wrote down the number of positive and negative interactions that occurred in that 15 minutes. Then, based only on a single 15-minute sample and his 5-to-1 hypothesis, he predicted how many of those relationships would succeed and how many would end in divorce. Ten years later Gottman interviewed those same couples and found that his predictions were accurate 94% of the time.

***In case studies with real individuals,  
Gottman's 5-to-1 hypothesis was accurate  
94% of the time.***

That's an overwhelming correlation, and it means this 5-to-1 ratio of positive-to-negative communication is probably a good ratio to gauge the health of your personal and professional relationships.

So a 'good' communicator, those misguided



fools, might have a conversation with a coworker along these lines.

### ***Dumb Worthless Example of Good Workplace Communication***

“Hey, Maggie. Just wanted to say excellent work on the Parker Project (+1). You met the deadline, (+2), came in at budget, (+3), and your presentation skills have really improved since last time (+4). Next time, I’d like you to try to communicate more regularly with me as things progress, because I didn’t always feel like I knew where we stood (-1). But overall, very well done (+5).

You can see the 5-to-1 ratio here. The criticism is definitely noticeable, but it doesn’t feel too heavy. In fact, this is likely to be interpreted as a primarily positive interaction that still offers some honest, useful, non-threatening ideas for

improvement.

So don't do that. Seriously, why would you want to be nice to anyone? It's not like they've ever done anything good for you. So get some payback.

And that payback should come in the form of one of the most awesome tools at your communicationating disposal...the compliment sandwich.



The compliment sandwich is easily one of the most popular weapons bad communicators use, and it should definitely be in your arsenal. The compliment sandwich is a 2-to-1 ratio of positive-to-negative, which as we've seen will ultimately help you create a toxic and unhealthy

environment, both at work and at home. However, because of its 2-to-1 nature, the compliment sandwich will help you convince yourself that you're being more complimentary than critical while simultaneously convincing the people you use it on that the bookended 'compliments' are your cover for the real point of the conversation, which is the criticism in the middle.

This one can be a *lot* of fun. When you can, give any of the following a shot. Trust me – you'll be glad you did!

### ***Awesome and Inspiring Examples of the Compliment Sandwich!***

1) “I want to thank you for meeting with me today. I must say, your performance this quarter leaves a lot to be desired. But at least it's better than your performance last quarter.”

2) “I'm so glad I married you. You were the best

I could find. But it's really nice to have somebody to do things with."

3) "First off, I really appreciate how understanding you've been during all this downsizing. Unfortunately, we've decided to cut your position. However, I'll be happy to write you a top-notch recommendation letter."

4) "You've been doing a really good job lately. So good, in fact, that you're actually making the rest of your team look bad. So please, keep up the good work! Just do less of it."

Take my word on this. Once you combine the MYFABMOFA plan with the power of the compliment sandwich, you'll soon be sitting alone at lunch every day for the rest of your natural life. Which is exactly what you should be shooting for. Because lunch companions occasionally steal your French fries. And nobody should be

messing with your fries.

## ***Remain Aloof and Above!***

So you now know how to talk to everyone you come in contact with – spouse, children, customers, colleagues, and the occasionally passerby unlucky enough to be within shouting distance. But sometimes, not talking to people can be an equally effective way to make them feel angry and disrespected. This is especially useful for managers, parents, or anybody else who is in a position of authority.

See, you are the brains of your company, division, or family, the animating force behind everything good that happens. Your employees (or children, or spouse), to continue the anatomical analogy, are the feet, the engine that powers everything. And your brain doesn't have to see your feet in order to tell them what to do, does it? Of course not! In fact, your brain is located

in your head specifically so that it can stay as far away from your feet as possible.

I think I've made my point. Other people are like feet. Disgusting, stinky feet. So take a page from your brain's playbook, and remain aloof and above. Because you should never, ever smell like feet.

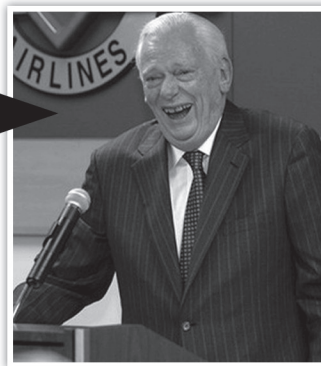
Now I'm sure you've read other business books that talk about the importance of 'knowing your people,' the supposed benefits you'll gain from spending time with them. Perhaps you've heard that George Zimmer, founder of Men's Wearhouse, attends more than 20 Men's Wearhouse holiday parties every year. Perhaps you've heard that Herb Kelleher, Southwest's longtime CEO, was famous for occasionally throwing bags on the tarmac with the other baggage handlers, and that in 1994 his employees spent \$60,000 of their own money for a full page ad in USA Today to thank him on Boss's Day for, among other things, remembering all their names.

And have these approaches been successful? That depends on how you define success. Men's Wearhouse boasts a 10% employee turnover ratio compared to an industry average of 25.1%, and as of 2004 George Zimmer's 8.7% stake in the company he founded was worth \$94 million. And during his tenure at Southwest, Herb Kelleher produced the highest return to shareholders of any company in the S&P 500. I suppose some people would consider these examples of success.

But not me.

Trust me, you don't want to end up these two. Seriously, look at the way Herb laughs.

**Dumb laugh** →



But you *will* end up like this if you act like they did.

# ***Pay Close Attention!***

Knowing your employees is the advice of a madman. It's crazy. And if there's only one concept that you take away from this entire book, please let it be this one:

## ***Other people are annoying.***

It's the truth. That's why we live in separate homes. That's why your offices are separated by walls, or fake walls, so that you can spend as little time with other people as possible. For example, I don't even know you, but I can tell just by the way you're holding the pages that there's something unpleasant about you. I'm sure the act of eating dinner with you is like pulling teeth.

Besides, the best tyrants – I mean, bosses – are invisible, powers that none can see and no one can approach. Because as every good tyrant



boss knows, the more time you spend with your subordinates, the more you will become like them.

And what exactly are they like? Well, perhaps you're familiar with Douglas McGregor's Theory X, a management philosophy he described in the 1960s. He didn't advocate it; he just described it. But I think it's amazing, and I truly don't understand how we don't have statues of Douglas McGregor in every office building in America. Here are the basic highlights:

### ***Theory X!***

- 1) Employees are naturally lazy.
- 2) Employees will avoid work whenever possible.
- 3) Employees naturally dislike work.
- 4) And most importantly, one that McGregor overlooked that I'm adding in here – *employees spread disease!!!*

It's true. They're like rats, just crawling all over each other. Every time you put people in groups, diseases happen. And the only way you can protect yourself from all this diseased and potentially fatal contact with others is to stay as far away from them as possible.

## ***Good News!***

Fortunately, many of you are probably already good at avoiding contact with your underlings. A 25-year Gallup poll of over 80,000 managers in over 400 companies found that the average total time managers spent discussing each employee's style and performance was approximately four hours per employee per year.

***The average time managers spend  
discussing their employees' style and  
performance is four hours per employee  
per year.***

And that's great – barely any time at all. So later on today, try to think about how much time you actually spend talking about work with the people who work for and with you – not about the work they have to do, since everybody does that all the time, but how they do that work and how they *feel* about how they do that work.

If you're in this 4 hour a year average, keep on keepin' on. You've figured it out. Your employees, coworkers, family members – everyone, really – they're just like the parts of a car. You need them, but you don't need to know anything about them. You just get in and drive. You do your thing, they do their thing, and never the twain shall meet. I don't know how my car works, and I don't really care.

Until it breaks. And what do you do with a broken car/employee/coworker/family member? You get rid of it, and you get yourself a new one.

And to help you become as aloof and above as possible, here are a few ideas to get you started:

# ***Becoming a Hermit 101***

- ***Keep your office separate!*** Hiding behind a closed door is a great tactic, but it's even better to keep your office in a separate part of the building – or better still, in a separate building entirely! People can't bother you if they can't reach you. However, they can still call you. What to do, what to do? Oh wait, I know...
- ***Rout all calls through voice mail!*** People will initially leave you a message and expect that you'll return the call. When you don't, they'll call again, but many of them won't leave a message because they won't want to seem pushy. And eventually, as long as you don't return calls, people will stop leaving messages altogether. Success!
- ***Keep irregular hours.*** You've tackled the where and how, now focus on the when. This technique has been perfected by college professors

at every university in America. Pay attention to how effectively they avoid their students. They're masters at it. In case you're curious, that's why they call it a Master's degree.

- ***Instruct your secretary or assistant to always say you're busy.*** A popular approach of agents, producers, and others in the entertainment world, this approach is even better than the one above. After all, people shouldn't have access to your telephone number in the first place.

Next, a special word of advice for the managers. You can and should do everything I've just encouraged you to do. But your best friend in this endeavor, the one that will help you remain aloof and above better than anything else, is...

## ***The Self-Appraisal!***

If you are not already forcing your employees to conduct regular self-appraisals, you need

to start immediately. The self-appraisal is unquestionably your best weapon in the fight to remain separate from the people who work for you.

Why? Several reasons. First, the self-appraisal allows you to eliminate the hassle of doing any actual work; all you have to do is pass out a paper or send out an email, and your job is done. Second, the self-appraisal by its very nature ensures that you will not spend any time or energy doing any critical thinking whatsoever about your workforce. It virtually ensures that you remain well beneath the 4-hour-a-year average you should be shooting for. Third, everyone on the planet hates filling out self-appraisals, which of course is why you should use them. It's not precisely a MYFABMOFA technique, but it's close enough.

But finally, and most importantly, the self-appraisal forces your employees to try and figure out how to best articulate their usefulness to

you and your company without sounding too impressive. They aren't going to give themselves a failing grade – who'd commit that kind of career suicide? – which effectively negates most of the 'thoughtful self-analysis' rationale behind issuing a self-appraisal in the first place. But they also know the best grade they can put on their self-appraisal is a B. They can't say they're too good or they'll look self-serving and not reflective enough. And since the best grade they can hope for is a B, the self-appraisal makes it almost impossible for your employees, no matter how good they actually are, to ever argue for a raise. It's a triple threat – time-consuming, frustrating, and of almost no value to anyone involved.

Enjoy!

***And now for something completely different...***

It should be obvious that my advice up to

this point has been terrible. It's awful, don't take it, do the opposite, that's the real message. And now my secret is revealed!

Like you, I've read way too many business books. I get them from presenters at conferences, or I buy them after recommendations from friends. Most of them have numbers in the title: the 21 Steps to a Better You, or the 18 Secrets of Rockstar Leadership. I've always been amused by those titles, partially because their formula reminds me of a Cosmo cover (37 New Ways to Make Him Wild For You!) Just so you know, Cosmo readers, there aren't any new ways to make men wild for you. We're perfectly happy with the same old ways we've been happy with for the last billion years. We men are simple creatures, which I'm sure is something you've known all along.

And I'd say the same thing to all those business book authors. There aren't any new secrets, and there aren't 25 steps. When you



get down to it, there's only one key to successful leadership: communication.

Do you want to be a well-respected leader, both personally and professionally? Do you want to be the kind of boss that others are excited to work for, the kind of manager whose employees consistently exceed their set goals and expectations? Do you want your spouse and children to respect and look up to you? Then you absolutely must create an environment in which the people around you feel free to speak, to share their thoughts and ideas, to challenge you when they think there might be a better way.

Let me give you my favorite business example. Everybody cites Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, as one of the most successful business leaders of the past 50 years. He's always held up as a symbol of how to do it right, and he regularly makes about \$300,000 to deliver a leadership seminar – which just so you know is not quite what I get paid for any of my various

presentations. To hear others talk of him, you'd think that Jack Welch never made a professional mistake in his life.

However, in his first ten years as CEO of GE, Welch was ranked fifth of seven among GE's CEOs in terms of return on equity. He was comfortably a bottom-half performer. He spent his first eight years at GE in a classic top-down hierarchical management model: he slashed and burned, sold off hundreds of companies and cut more than 170,000 jobs. I've read at least one book that credits Welch with inventing downsizing. In 1984 Fortune magazine named him the toughest boss in America, and all of this collectively earned him the nickname 'Neutron Jack,' named for a theoretical atomic weapon that can destroy people while leaving buildings intact.

How flattering.

Then, in 1989, after a chance conversation with a management professor at a conference,

Welch came upon the idea of the Work-Outs, which was his way of saying, ‘Why don’t we ask our employees what they think could be done to solve problems?’ That this was considered a groundbreaking concept in 1989 blows my freaking mind. I’ve got three employees, and if I didn’t ask them what they thought we should do as we move forward, I would have zero employees really, really fast. Anyway, he put the Work-Outs in place, and two things happened.

First, they were extremely popular, which shouldn’t be a surprise, since everybody on the planet likes knowing that others are listening to their opinions.

But more importantly, at least from a business perspective, GE’s net income went from \$3.9 billion in 1989 to \$5.9 billion in 1994. That is a 51% increase, absolutely unheard of in a corporation that size. And in 1994, General Electric was the most profitable corporation in the United States.

***Thanks to the Work-Outs, GE's net income  
went from \$3.9 billion in 1989  
to \$5.9 billion in 1994.***

Now the traditional argument is that GE had to divest its low-performing companies before it could achieve that kind of stellar and unprecedented growth. I'm inclined to agree. My question is this: were those failing units underperforming because they were inherently flawed, or because Jack Welch had not yet hit upon the management style that would have made them all profitable?

Here's what I think. If Welch had thought to ask his employees in 1981 what they thought could be done to improve things, most of those 170,000 layoffs would not have been necessary. I'm not saying he was a bad leader. But I am saying that he wasted a good portion of eight years trying to do everything himself or through the heads of his various divisions before figuring

out that maybe GE's employees might have a few good ideas of their own.

And you might be doing the same thing. If you're constantly giving orders and spending 4 hours a year asking your employees what their thoughts are, you're probably not using them to their full potential. More importantly, you're not using them *as much as they want to be used*. That's the real benefit of effective communication. People want to help. They want to be heard. All you need to do is give them the opportunity.

So take a moment and try to answer the following question:

*When was the last time one of your employees directly contradicted you?*

This week? This month? Can you remember at all? Now, let me ask you another question:

*When was the last time your **spouse** directly contradicted you?*

I'd ask you to think about it, but I don't need to. It happened today. Or last night. Perhaps yesterday afternoon at the absolutely latest. IT HAPPENS EVERY DAY OF YOUR MARRIED LIFE!!!! I know it does. Your spouse never stops disagreeing with you. He or she contradicts you all the time. Not in a bad way, necessarily, but in a 'I think we should do it like *this*' kind of way.

And do you know why they do that? Because they don't fear you. Your relationship with your spouse is equal, or relatively equal, as it has to be if you're going to have a long and healthy relationship with that person.

And the same rules that govern personal relationships are the ones that need to govern your professional relationships. You're going to have a different kind of relationship with your boss, or coworker, or employee, than you do with your husband or wife, of course. But if open communication is the key to a successful marriage, it's also the key to a successful business

relationship.

So the next time you have the chance, ask your employees what they think could be done to improve things around the office. Solicit their input about new initiatives and prospective changes. Ask them to tell you what isn't working, and why, and how they'd fix it if they could. And if you really want to improve morale, ask them what they want out of their job over and above the salary and benefits that you offer. Fewer than 40% of employers *ever* have a conversation with their employees that addresses those issues, and that's a large part of the reason that there's often such a disconnect between what employers think is important (generally, salary and benefits) and what employees think is important (generally salary, benefits, and some intangible psychological reward).

Seriously, you'll never know until you ask. And seriously again, you might be surprised by what you learn.

## ***And now, a word about the MYFABMOFA...***

I hardly think I need to tell you that the MYFABMOFA plan is probably not the best approach to interpersonal communication. I do want to say, though, that I think it's important to make fun of the people around you – if for no other reason than because you're going to do it anyway. Everybody makes fun of everybody all the time about everything; that's one of the ways we connect as human beings. I think you can gauge the health of any institution – any family, business, or government – by looking at how easily the people in it are able to make fun of each other. Repressive systems (dictatorships, bad places to work, unhealthy marriages) don't take a joke very well. Healthy ones do.

So I think it's important to make fun of the people in your lives – to their face, not behind their back. But that said, I don't think it's the



only way we should communicate. And most of us spend far more time on sarcasm than sincerity. Most of us are far more comfortable saying, ‘You’re really annoying me’ than ‘You’re really important to me.’

That’s unfortunate. Because just like it’s easy to spend a few minutes every day coming up with something uniquely clever and sarcastic to say to a friend, it’s equally easy to spend a few minutes every day coming up with something uniquely clever and complimentary to say to a friend, loved one, or coworker. And it can repay huge dividends.

## ***Example Time!***

The best proof I have that small kindnesses yield large rewards happened when my first wife and I were shopping for a place to have our rehearsal dinner. We were living in Nashville, and I called several places around town. The

first five all said the same thing. ‘Sounds great. That’ll be X dollars per person, here’s what comes with that, think it over and call us back.’

Then I called the sixth place – it’s Blackstone’s on West End, right between Vanderbilt and downtown – and here’s what the events’ manager said. ‘Sounds great. Why don’t you and your fiancée come by, we’ll buy you lunch and talk it over.’

So we went in. And you know what happened? She told me, almost word for word, the exact same thing I’d heard from five other people. X dollars per person, here’s what that gives you – it was an extremely boring conversation. The only difference is that while I was hearing the same thing for the sixth time, they bought us drinks, and lunch, and dessert. They were the only people who made us feel like we mattered to them, and that’s why we had our rehearsal dinner at Blackstone’s.

A few months later I realized that they spent

maybe \$15 on us, at their cost – and we gave them \$4,000.

That's not a bad return. We had \$4,000 we were going to throw at somebody. They took an hour out of their day to make us feel like we were important, and that's why they won our business.

And those are the things that matter to customers, and to spouses and children and coworkers as well. As a customer, for example, I don't think I'm particularly original. If the prices and services are comparable, and they usually are, then I don't really care where I get what I need. A doctor is a doctor, a bank is a bank, a lawyer is a lawyer, and insurance provider is an insurance provider – and if I don't know any better, whatever it is you do is exactly the same as whatever it is your competitors do. The biggest thing that will influence me toward or away from your company – and by extension, the biggest thing that will determine whether or

not I enjoy working with you as a colleague – are the little things you do to make me feel more or less important, more or less respected, and more or less valuable.

So what's the application for your business?

I think it's safe to assume that when you offer greetings to your customers or compliments to your coworkers, you do it in the same four or five ways all the time. Good job, well done, nice to see you, good work – whatever it is you say, you say all the time. And like I said earlier, repetition steals the meaning from the things we say. I've heard 'Good job!' a million times in my life, including several occasions where I very obviously did not do a good job. It's not a real compliment to me anymore, and probably not to you either.

But if you make a tiny change to that, if you take 5 seconds to choose your words carefully – "Bravo, that was exceptional" – I guarantee your colleagues will notice. I don't want you to change the meaning of what you intend to say,

and I don't want you to take any more time out of your day. You're already plenty busy. But I do want you to get in the habit of choosing your words more carefully.

Now you might be tempted to think that all this soft-skills feel-good crap isn't really the purpose of your business. After all, most of this communications stuff isn't in your official job description. But the interesting thing is that most of the truly important elements to a successful business, or a successful relationship, aren't the ones that sit bright and obvious on the surface.

Do you know what the overwhelming majority of women consider to be the most important feature of a gas station? Clean restrooms – which, incidentally, have nothing to do with gasoline. Do you know what the most important factor that determines whether two people in the same office will work together on projects? It's the proximity of their desks to one another – which once again has nothing to do with whether they

have similar educations, interests, or abilities. Can you guess what single factor matters most in determining how much you'll eat for dinner? The size of the plate you use. It's true; if you eat off of smaller plates, you'll eat less. That has nothing to do with how hungry you are, or the food you're eating.

In many cases, the most important factors aren't the ones you'd expect. And when it comes to retaining customers, strengthening relationships, or improving efficiency, it's not money, or vacation time, or education, or hours worked that matter the most. As I said earlier, the three biggest factors that determine an employee's happiness and productivity are their relationship with their immediate superiors, their relationship with their coworkers, and an easy commute. And while you don't control their commute, the other two are directly related to how well or poorly you communicate with the people around you.

And remember, that 5-to-1 ratio is an excellent guide to follow. I don't expect you to write down every compliment and every criticism you ever offer, but you should have a sense about whether or not you're offering five times as many positive remarks as negative. If you're not, make a conscious effort to do so. If you can't find something nice to say about somebody, chances are you aren't looking hard enough.

Don't take that the wrong way.

**MYFABMOFA  
is awesome!**





## ***About Jeff Havens***

One of the most dynamic and original voices in modern business, Jeff Havens is a regular guest on Fox Business News and has been featured in Business Week, the Wall Street Journal, CNBC, AOL, and Bloomberg News.

His basic message? Helping people succeed by telling them how to do things really, really badly. And for the last decade Jeff has been bringing his unique combination of entertainment and high-level business content to General Electric, Ford Motors, and hundreds of other companies and corporations across the United States (and Canada!).

Whether it's communication, leadership, change management, career development, professional etiquette, generational issues, or anything else,

Jeff will show you the path to success in part by showing you exactly what not to do. Because as he likes to say, improving your business doesn't have to be boring.

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Vanderbilt University, Jeff currently lives in the Midwest but hopes not to someday. Not that there's anything wrong with it, of course. It's where he grew up. It's just...well, there are other places, you know?

Visit ***JeffHavens.com*** to learn how Jeff can speak to your organization!

