Superstition, by Marshall Goldsmith

Walking under a ladder. Breaking a mirror. A black cat darting across our path. Whoa! Most of us scorn superstitions as silly beliefs of the primitive and uneducated. Deep down inside, we assure ourselves that we're above these antiquated notions.

Not so fast. To a degree, we're all superstitious. In many cases, the higher we climb the organizational totem pole, the more superstitious we become.

Psychologically speaking, superstitious behavior comes from the belief that nonfunctional activity followed by positive reinforcement is actually the cause of that positive reinforcement. Years ago, psychologist B.F. Skinner showed how hungry pigeons may repeat nonfunctional behavior when their twitches and scratches are reinforced by small pellets of grain. From my experience, hungry corporate leaders may also repeat nonfunctional behavior when large pellets of money and recognition follow.

Superstition is merely the confusion of correlation and causality. Any human (in fact, any animal) tends to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. The more we achieve, the more reinforcement we get. One of the greatest mistakes of successful leaders is the assumption, "I behave this way, and I achieve results. Therefore, I must achieve results because I behave this way."

Almost everyone I meet is successful because of doing a lot right, and almost everyone I meet is successful in spite of some behavior that doesn't make any sense.

--Marshall Goldsmith
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