

Owning Your "It"

Actionable tools to improve your
interpersonal communication

By Margot Halstead

Illustrated
By Dug

Copyright 2024

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission except in the case of brief quotes used in reviews or articles.

This book is for entertainment purposes only.

No part of this book should be interpreted as legal, medical, psychological, or other advice. The reader assumes full responsibility for their actions. The author and publisher assume no liability for the misuse or use of any of the information or techniques shared in this volume. No part of this book shall be interpreted to represent any guarantee, contract or agreement between the reader and author.

These tools won't stand up to academic scrutiny (or likely won't stand up to academic scrutiny); the examples I give provide a level of simplicity for all to understand.

ISBN: 979-8-9905591-1-0

Cover art by Dug
www.dug.art

Edited by Self Publishing Services
selfpublishingservices@gmail.com

Page formatting and design by Renata Strauss
renata@madegraphicdesign.com

*To my husband, Jason; my brother,
Brian; my parents, Bob and Lonnie Wornom;
and my children, Kent and Emma.*

IT DEPENDS

In the Halstead household, the answer to every question is either money, or it depends.

OWNING YOUR IT FOREWORD

By Dr. Marshall Goldsmith

IN A WORLD THAT INCREASINGLY DEMANDS AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-AWARENESS, *OWNING YOUR IT* BY MARGOT HALSTEAD OFFERS A REFRESHING AND PRACTICAL GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND MASTERING OUR INNER DIALOGUES AND BEHAVIORS. This book is not just about becoming more self-aware; it's about actively engaging with our subconscious behaviors—our “ITs”—and learning how to control them rather than allowing them to control us. Margot's insights, drawn from years of experience in coaching and leadership development, provide a unique approach to personal growth that is both accessible and transformative.

From the very first pages, Margot challenges us to consider the aspects of our personalities that we often overlook or ignore. These are the small habits, thoughts, and reactions that subtly shape our interactions and define how others perceive us. By bringing these to light, *Owning Your IT* empowers readers to take control of their narrative and project a more authentic version of themselves to the world. This book is about more than just self-improvement; it's about self-ownership and taking responsibility for how we present ourselves in every situation.

What sets this book apart is its practical framework for identifying and managing these behavioral patterns. Margot doesn't just tell us what we should do; she shows us how to do it. Through engaging anecdotes and clear, actionable steps, she guides us in naming our ITs, understanding their origins, and transforming them from unconscious

habits into intentional behaviors. This process, as Margot outlines, is not about eliminating parts of who we are but rather integrating them in a way that allows us to be our best selves.

One of the most powerful aspects of *Owning Your IT* is its focus on real-world application. Margot understands that change doesn't happen in a vacuum and that personal growth is a continuous journey rather than a destination. She equips her readers with tools that are meant to be revisited and refined over time, ensuring that the lessons learned from this book are not just temporary fixes but lasting improvements that can evolve alongside us.

For anyone looking to improve their interpersonal skills, enhance their self-awareness, or simply live a more intentional life, *Owning Your IT* is an invaluable resource. Margot Halstead's wisdom and guidance have already transformed the lives of many through her coaching, and with this book, she extends that opportunity to a broader audience. This is a must-read for anyone committed to personal development and eager to discover the potential within themselves. As you turn these pages, prepare to embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment that will leave you better equipped to navigate the complexities of human interaction with grace and authenticity.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith is the Thinkers50 #1 Executive Coach and New York Times bestselling author of The Earned Life, Triggers, and What Got You Here Won't Get You There.

1

What's in It for You?

THIS BOOK GIVES YOU THE GIFT OF LETTING IT BE all about you for about 300 pages. Constructive conversation can only happen when it is...all about you. As well it should be, as who you are is influenced, manipulated, and nuanced by the collection of your experiences. You can't leapfrog to consistently constructive conversations in every aspect of your life. Getting better at it requires your full attention... on yourself, not others. Others need to focus on themselves, not you, and vice versa.

By giving yourself the gift of this time to look at your ITs—unintentional communication habits you may be using, overusing, or underusing—you will be able to discover some that might not be serving you in ways that present the best you. I offer this gift to you and others you share it with as we all benefit from improved interpersonal skills with the reward of deeper connections to others and a robust personalized toolbelt full of tools.

In my work as a consultant with struggling teams and a coach of people with career-damaging interpersonal skills, I've seen similar issues creep into conversations, which led to patterns. I began referring to the pat-

A constructive conversation is between two people, is built on a mutual foundation with good intentions, and moves to a mutually determined end.

terns as Riley, a holistic person who was demonstrating the symptoms of the pattern I was noticing and always turned around with the skills I gave them. Always. Having witnessed the successes of many Rileys, I knew it was time to share these tools to support all of you.

My life experiences have influenced my journey, just like yours have for you. I capitalized on my life experiences at a very young age (a full explanation for those who are interested is in the back of the book) and independently started treating all of my communication challenges as opportunities to make communication tools that worked for me. Much later, I came to realize that not everyone looks at communication that way; my extensive toolbox is overflowing as I see many others as depleted. I recognized the differences in others' priorities led to different specialties, similar to others having an overflowing toolbox related to nursing, masonry, braiding, accounting, or astrophysics. My toolbox is full of skills impacting how we constructively speak, one person to another. Your gifts and passions have led you to your career, the way my skills and passion guided me toward facilitation, coaching, and working with individuals and teams who have deficient or nonrobust communication skills toolbelts.

My collection of experiences has been upgraded with continuous opportunities to gather and hone not only the theories of interpersonal com-

munication, but the tools to realistically increase competence in using and teaching them to others. There is clearly knowing, and knowing a lot, and then there is implementing the theories with tools.

What has your journey looked like so far? How will your current experience be categorized in your collection? What do you know your experiences have prepared you for, and what do you think your future experiences are preparing you for next? Your current experiences have created your current toolbelt, and it is quite full with your specific skills. As you move forward with your life and this book, you will determine how they are organized, how you are using them, and how you are going to add to them.

I'm reminded of a friend who was born with a condition that limited the growth of her jaw and teeth, and she underwent unending dental surgeries while she was growing up. To absolutely no one's shock, she became a dentist. Or another, a former drug abuser who is now sober and stays that way by helping others as a social worker at a rehab center. These experiences impact your communication habits as well; consider a colleague who grew up with an alcoholic mother who now is (and no longer wants to be) a professional people pleaser. These experiences shape not only what we do for a living, but how we present ourselves in each conversation.

I specialize in people with career-damaging interpersonal skills. You can make that short leap into my lived experience to determine what inspired my interest in learning everything I could about interpersonal dynamics: I was a jerk. An untamed, blunt person who soon learned how her voice could make her so unattractive that no amount of makeup would conceal it.

Life happened, and when our children were three and five, my husband was involved in a horrific accident and there was a mo-

ment during his initial extended hospital stay that inspired the documentation of all the tools in my toolbelt. While he was in the critical attention ward (one step below ICU), I was resting outside the nurses' station, taking a break from sitting inside with my husband. The ward is set up in a semicircle with the nurses' station placed to see into all of the rooms at once.

Here, I observed the nurse on duty go into the first room on one end of the semicircle to check on the patient. He took out the notes for that patient and began his brief interview: "Hello, Mr. XX. How are you today?"

The patient answered, "Like sh% you moth—f—er. Can't you see I'm hooked up to this cr*& and can't pi** on my own without a..."*

The nurse said, "Well, that sounds frustrating Mr. XX. Let's see if I can get you some...", and moved into the next room after making the appropriate notations.

Making his way around the semicircle, he entered the next room and started the same: "Hello, Ms. XX. How are you today?"

The patient answered similarly with colorful adjectives and expletives while the nurse continued to write in his chart, offer words of comfort, and move on to the next room. My husband's. I watched the nurse engage with my husband as well as the patients in four other rooms in the same manner, each patient railing at the nurse with varying levels of loudness and intensity, all at the high end.

Only one patient of the eight or so in the semicircle was relatively polite, providing a "please" and a "thank you" and actually asking how the nurse was that day. When he came back to the station, I

was flummoxed, considering how he'd actively chosen this career and looked so calm as he came back to the station after all of these people had berated him, presumably every day! So I asked him how he was doing.

Him: I'm sorry, ma'am, what are you referring to?

Me: Well, I just observed your rounds, and I'm wondering how you are doing after that experience.

Him: I'm sorry. I really don't understand what you are asking.

Me [eyes bulging in disbelief that he could possibly not understand what I was saying]: All of those patients just screamed at you; I was flustered watching and listening to the perpetual berating. How are you?

Him: Oooo, I get it. Yeah, I listen to them with a different filter. The louder, more obnoxious, and especially the more they swear, the higher I know they are on the pain scale. Take the lady who asked me about how I was. I know she is ready for discharge because of how kindly she was able to speak to me.

The calm that came over me with the understanding is hopefully the same calm you are experiencing now as you read this. Grasping the understanding of the meta message that language provides put patience in my toolbelt forever. No amount of someone attempting to advise me to “just be more patient” ever worked. This skill of taking the meta message of word choice from theory to example transformed the knowledge into a tool.

In my communication mind, all the connections between my upbringing, my life experiences, my studies, and my interests in interpersonal communication were instantly put together. Words were a symbol of inner pain. A flash of stories was flying across my brain in that moment: My babies' cries were pain and discomfort, the patients in front of me were in pain and discomfort, and people in my life who were rude to me were in pain and discomfort. I also inflicted my pain and discomfort on others through my words and actions. Receiving word choice from others instantly went into my toolbelt, reminding me to not only pay attention to their word choice and their delivery with tone, pitch, and speed, but also to the meta message they demonstrated through their leaking behaviors (intentionally, or most likely, unconsciously) when they were unskilled or unable to share based on their internal motivations/experiences.

A child's temper tantrum comes to mind as an easy example to understand because children do not have the vocabulary to express their frustration. This appears as an obvious display of an observable behavior that most witnesses can translate to a sign of discomfort with something happening to or around the child. Now consider the adult temper tantrum in your household or office. These adults also do not have the vocabulary to express their inner frustration; their behavioral display of throwing objects, slamming doors, raising their voice, invading your space, and swearing is an example of their behavior following their thoughts. The words they choose are a signal into their level of emotional intelligence, and their level of communication savvy, and a signal to any receiver to restore patience as they glean insight into the other's level of pain. This nurse received the meta message of pain instead of the actual message of filth, foul language, and rudeness.

After that experience and a long role as caregiver during my husband's recovery, I returned to advancing my career in service of improving the volume of constructive conversations within every organization I served. My early focus was on training and quickly moved to leadership development, coaching, and culture assessment.

I found myself inadvertently repeating a process I was not trying to create. The steps had yet to be named, and up until now, the process has been formulated in stealth, expressed with accuracy, and implemented hundreds of times with successful outcomes. The most common feedback I hear is "I've never heard it explained that way before," so here is where you are hearing those explanations. After repeating these concepts and descriptions in seminars and coaching hundreds of leaders, a natural how-to process emerged. A process that put all the well-meaning suggestions for communication improvement from others coded with the vocabulary of "just"—just don't let it bother you; just get over it; just stop it; just ignore them—into an actionable process.

This is where it continues to be all about you. My niche of skills is not meant to be held forever in my brain. I have witnessed the tools help so many people, and my clients and colleagues have encouraged me to share all of these tools, not only with you, but with everyone you know who would benefit. Each of us has around 250 people in our circle of influence, and each of those connections would help a collective of thousands in your lifetime. You are the initial beneficiary of my work, and then you will pay it forward for all of our benefit.

The techniques and methods work and the tools will permanently be placed into your toolbelt during the process. You will discover your behavioral habits; gain agency over them; and learn how to transform them

to getting over, stopping, or ignoring behavioral habits that are unintentionally leaking during conversations and not presenting your best you.

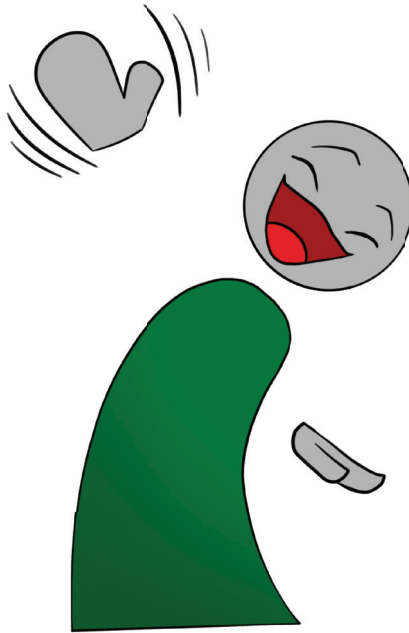
I would like you to embrace this book as your personal mentor, knowing that you can start from any place within it, based on your level of self-awareness. Feel free to repeat the process, and give yourself the grace and patience to discover where you are starting, knowing that your journey may not be a straight or comfortable line.

Why should you bother if you've gotten this far in life and done fine? Is that true? Are you really doing fine? Would your significant other or best friend say you are productive and constructive in every interpersonal interaction you have? Can you say your behavior doesn't have any rough spots that could be smoothed out?

Those behavioral blind spots are what I call ITs. ITs may be physical (such as nearsightedness, thinning hair, or diabetes), emotional (needing to satisfy others, goal orientation, or loyalty), or behavioral (working quickly, being orderly, perpetually grooming such as fixing your hair or tidying your clothes, or dressing in a certain style). Everyone has at least one IT. Maybe more than one.

Owning Your IT will make you authentic and confident in your self-presentation, *especially* under stress. Do you know what your ITs are? Do you own your ITs, or do you make excuses? I want you to keep reading to not only discover what your ITs are, but to embrace them as part of you, so that the behaviors that represent your thoughts present the best you.

Here I introduce you to the Grumples, the illustrative representations of the ITs or of the behaviors supporting the ITs that may be plaguing you. The Grumples are here to support and reinforce the concepts and skills shared with hundreds of others who have embraced the images as visual



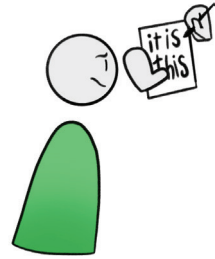
bookmarks. I hope you find them invaluable as you assimilate them into your transformation.

You can start the process by gaining awareness of the existence of your ITs and realizing their effect on your presentation of yourself. You can then choose to stop allowing them to run amok in the background; instead, you can put them in the foreground where they can be useful.

The next step is giving your IT a name; that will help you gain agency over your IT. Your agency can blossom into control over your IT through active engagement, and you will see how your IT has been running the movie projector behind the curtain of your life. Regaining control moves your IT from a habit to a tool. Along the way, I'll give you additional tools that will lead to you *owning your IT*.

You will notice that *Owning Your IT* is divided into five sections. Each one correlates to a step in the process and comes with its own set of tools and skills to add to your toolbelt.

Be aware of your potential IT: Because our behaviors follow our thoughts, your current behaviors may be presenting as a polite representation of yourself instead of the you that is consistent with the self-portrait perceived by others. We all do this to protect our “faces” and ensure that we are seen in a positive light; however, your presentation is influenced by your inner voice’s “shoulds.” This unconscious or intentional behavior attempts to follow your thoughts that

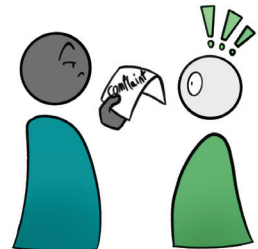


are based on the “depends” presented in the moment and influenced by other people’s voices. The first tool you will get is how you can relate to your mind as a **condo** so you can...



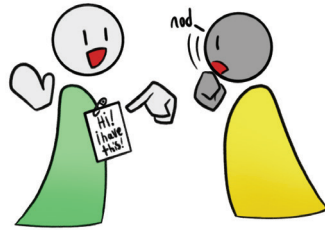
Label your IT: Naming your IT will ease your mind. That ease will come with recognizing, hearing, and listening to what is sometimes called your inner dialogue or your thoughts. Do you hear yours? I invite you to listen (for the first time, for some of you) to your inner voice and learn how your brain works on au-

tomatic. Your inner voice’s goal is to alert you to potential harms, leaving you to decide *how* you are thinking by taking advantage of the **F.E.A.R.** tool as well as several others. Labeling your IT is your ticket to officially strap your toolbelt onto your waist and use the tools to...



Gain agency over your IT: When you are more confident that your IT is conquerable—in the manner that you define and desire—that is having agency over your IT. The tools to get you there will include **The Caring Dial, Over the Shoulder, Wheel of Emotions**, and **50/50**, allowing you to then...

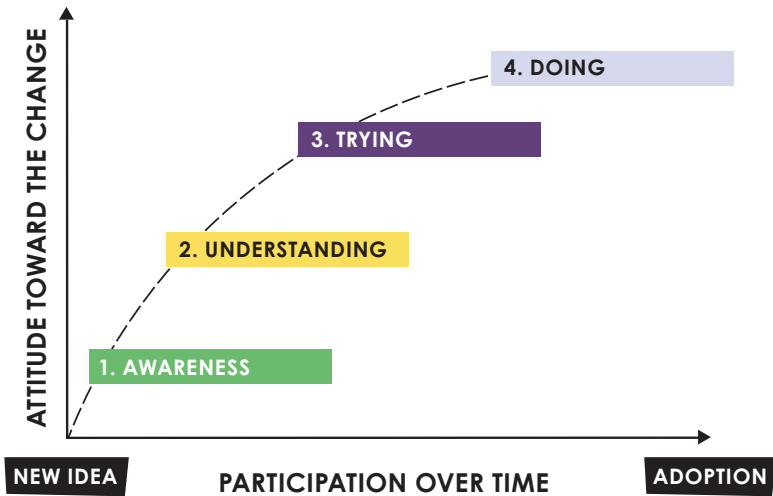
Gain control of your IT: Now your toolbelt is going to explode with options—tools that are just right for you to have cognitive control over your IT. They include mastering asking questions that you know the answer to, adding qualifiers that elicit others' critical thinking, **W.A.I.T., Intellectual Humility, Graduated Questions**, and **Know the Goal**. All in service to you to...



Own your IT: When you engage multiple tools to reconstruct the relationship you have with your inner voice, you will no longer succumb to, deny, ignore, or complain about your IT and wish your IT would change, go away, or disappear. You will own your IT. You will have the cognitive control to present yourself in an authentic way, conveying increased confidence, success, trust, and inspiration.



Only then can you incorporate the final skill: **The Magical Ok**. Simplistic in title, The Magical Ok is the most difficult tool of all and requires the assimilation and coordinated implementation of all the tools ahead of it.



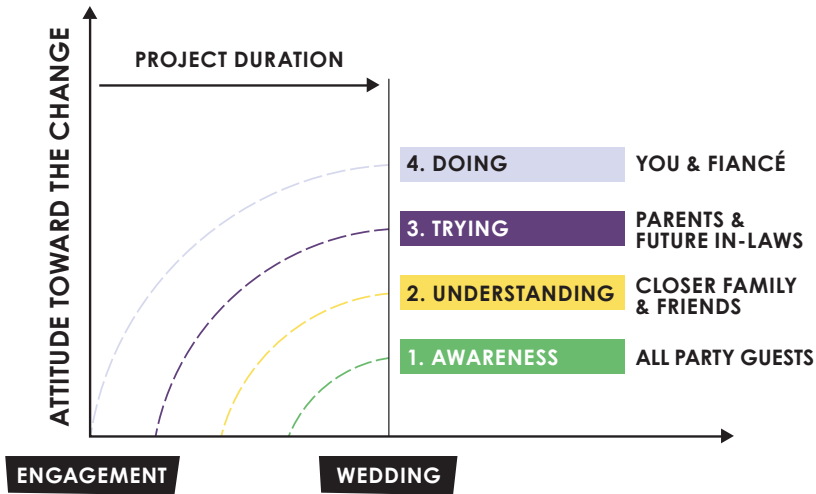
YOUR FIRST TOOL

As you can see, many tools will be added to your toolbelt, and there is no time like the present to start. Change is challenging. It is one thing to grasp the concept by reading about it and looking at the illustrations. How do you manage change? What is your natural way to adjust to change? Do you resist it? Love and/or embrace it? Deny it is happening? Why? Your answer likely is, "It depends."

What have you done in the past when confronted with a need to change your behaviors? Have you ever thought further about how you engage with change? No worries if you haven't, as hundreds of people have studied how we change, and they've created the universal change acceptance curve:¹

1 Adapted from the widely used change acceptance curve originally based on the work published by Kübler-Ross.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?



In the curve, you start at the bottom left, and during any change you are faced with, you rise to the upper right as you go through awareness, understanding, trying, and doing. If, for example, a wedding is being planned, the two people getting married will be involved in all the details because they know about the event sooner than any other members of the family or friends. At each stage of the project, different groups of people will become involved, either intimately or tangentially, and they will have different levels of knowledge and understanding. When the event takes place, every participant will be at a different location in the change curve.

In everyday scenarios, when you become aware of a necessary change, large or small, such as replacing a car, moving apartments, or breaking up with a friend, you might go through the four phases with no stress or struggle. Or you may get stuck in any one of the phases depending on whether the change is a surprise, explained to you, or out of your control. Your attitude toward change alters with each step.

During the awareness phase, you learn that changed circumstances will require corresponding changes in your way of being. You might have to learn about different financing options based on your choice of a new car, figure out how to manage your anxiety about getting to know your new neighbors, or understand that a friendship might be healthier for you if it ended.

In the understanding phase, you learn how the change will affect you by asking lots of questions about your current situation and about what your future situation will look like. Who else might be affected by the increased cost of the car? How will you be perceived, and will you be welcomed by your new neighbors? What are the broader consequences of ending this relationship? How do I do this? What will be the upside? How do I know if I'm doing it right?

After you get all your questions answered or you're satisfied with what you know, you can move on to trying. You feel safe enough to begin living with the change. You discover, test, sample, and evaluate, and you ask more clarifying questions. You might be paying increased insurance premiums and perhaps lower maintenance costs, begin engaging with your new neighbors, and role-play what you will say when you break up with your friend. And, in this process, you will be given the skills that I'm sharing with you and watching the impact of those new tools.

And last, in doing, you are operating within the confines of the new item, behavior, or circumstances, and the change curve moves from being all about you. Now you can observe where others are in the change process. Once you have fully assimilated the tools and achieved the desired result for yourself, you have the space to identify where the other person or people are in their change acceptance and perhaps realize that they are not at the same place as you.



time it takes each Grumple to move through each phase is not fixed; the purple Grumple, for example, might be permanently stuck in the understanding phase based on their lived experiences—their “it depends.”

To add any of these tools to your toolbelt will take practice. Therefore, most chapters have lab work to challenge your current way of thinking. I will be encouraging you to treat yourself as your own science experiment, because that is where self-awareness originates. Embrace the process of engaging change with grace while you grow, and give yourself points for the effort.² Each tool added will help you recognize when you are stuck within the change curve and help you get unstuck. The first tool of knowing the change curve exists is now firmly planted in your toolbelt. Referring to the diagram and identifying where you are on the curve will help release some stress or anxiety you may be feeling about a change you may or may not know you are in.

2 As in Brownie points, merits or demerits, the unsocial construct where we give and take imaginary points from each other based on good or poor behavior, clever connections, humor, or missed opportunities.

When being your own science experiment, try not to criticize yourself for not recognizing fast enough or early enough or any other judgment your inner voice may throw at you. All the noticing is data, and the time difference between not noticing and noticing will only get shorter and shorter the more you practice. Most of the lab work you'll receive will be notice-based. These are skills you might not have known before, so don't let the "shoulds" creep in.

As with other science experiments you have conducted, work iteratively in this learning experiment about you. The lab work suggested is related to the content of the chapter. However, you can do the exercises in whatever order works for you. Many of the thought-provoking assignments ask you to notice as the crux of the activity. Here, give yourself points for *noticing*—not only for *doing*. Noticing is work, and it will challenge your "struggle muscle." I want you to give yourself credit for that effort.

Let's get started.