

Book Review: *Triggers* by Marshall Goldsmith

Opening / Summary of the Book's Key Points

In *Triggers: Creating Behavior That Lasts—Becoming the Person You Want to Be*, Marshall Goldsmith, with Mark Reiter, offers a practical examination of why personal change is so difficult and why even highly successful people often fail to sustain better habits, stronger relationships, and more effective leadership behaviors.

The central message of the book is that behavior change is not simply a matter of intention, intelligence, or willpower. Our environment constantly triggers responses—impatience, defensiveness, avoidance, overconfidence, distraction, or passivity—that pull us away from the person and leader we intend to become. Goldsmith argues that if we want durable change, we must become more aware of these triggers and build disciplined structures that help us respond rather than react.

For board directors, senior executives, investors, and professionals navigating complex organizations, *Triggers* provides a useful framework for thinking about leadership effectiveness, boardroom behavior, accountability, and self-management. The book is not primarily about strategy, finance, or governance. Its value lies in showing that performance often turns on behavior: how leaders listen, prepare, follow through, handle conflict, receive feedback, and show up under pressure.

Director Relevance / Why This Book Matters Now

This book is especially relevant for directors because modern board service requires more than technical expertise. Boards need directors who can exercise judgment under uncertainty, listen carefully, challenge constructively, manage ego, and contribute to a high-functioning board culture. In an environment shaped by AI, cyber risk, geopolitical disruption, regulatory scrutiny, capital allocation pressure, and stakeholder expectations, the boardroom cannot afford poor behavioral discipline.

Goldsmith's core insight is directly applicable: even accomplished leaders are vulnerable to environmental triggers. A director may intend to ask better questions, avoid dominating the discussion, engage more deeply with technology risk, or challenge management more effectively. But time pressure, status dynamics, incomplete information, and group norms can easily produce old behaviors. *Triggers* reminds directors that governance effectiveness begins with self-awareness and disciplined behavior.

More Detail on the Key Points

The first major contribution of the book is its focus on the **power of the environment**. Goldsmith argues that people often underestimate how strongly their surroundings shape

behavior. We assume we are acting independently, when in reality we are responding to cues, pressures, incentives, and relationships. For directors, this means boardroom behavior is shaped by agenda design, committee structure, meeting cadence, management reporting, chair leadership, and cultural norms.

A second important theme is **the gap between intention and execution**. Many leaders genuinely want to improve. They want to listen better, delegate more effectively, reduce impatience, or become more present. Yet good intentions are fragile unless they are supported by structure. Goldsmith's use of daily questions and accountability mechanisms is especially powerful because it converts aspiration into repeatable practice.

A third key point is **active responsibility**. Goldsmith emphasizes that individuals should ask whether they did their best to pursue a goal, rather than merely asking whether an outcome occurred. This distinction matters. "Did I do my best to listen?" is more behaviorally useful than "Was I a good listener today?" It shifts responsibility back to effort, discipline, and choice.

A fourth theme is **feedforward rather than feedback alone**. Goldsmith encourages leaders to seek ideas for future improvement rather than becoming trapped in defensive reactions to past criticism. This has direct boardroom application. Boards need feedback on performance, but they also need forward-looking development: what capabilities, behaviors, and disciplines must we strengthen to be more effective next year than we were last year?

Examples / Practical Application

One practical example from the book is Goldsmith's daily-question process. Rather than relying on vague resolutions, individuals ask themselves a disciplined set of questions each day, often beginning with "Did I do my best to..." This small shift creates a personal accountability system. For a director, comparable questions might include: Did I do my best to prepare for the meeting? Did I ask the question that needed to be asked? Did I listen for what management was not saying? Did I help improve the quality of the board's discussion?

Another useful example is the idea that successful people often resist change because their past success becomes evidence that their behavior is already sufficient. This is a particularly important warning for boards. Directors are often selected because they have been successful executives, investors, regulators, attorneys, technologists, or financial experts. But the behaviors that produced success in one setting may not be sufficient in the boardroom, where influence is indirect, authority is collective, and effectiveness depends heavily on judgment, preparation, and interpersonal credibility.

The book also has personal relevance for leaders. It encourages readers to assess their own triggers: the colleague who causes impatience, the topic that creates defensiveness, the meeting format that leads to disengagement, or the pressure that causes overreaction. That

self-assessment is valuable because leadership effectiveness often depends less on title than on behavioral consistency.

Financial Expert / Audit Committee Lens

For SEC Qualified Financial Experts and audit committee members, *Triggers* raises an important question: does the board have the behavioral discipline to evaluate financial information, controls, assumptions, and assurance processes without becoming complacent?

Audit committee effectiveness depends not only on technical knowledge of financial reporting, internal controls, valuation, liquidity, leverage, disclosure, and audit quality. It also depends on the willingness to probe, listen, challenge assumptions, and avoid cognitive traps. A financially expert director may understand the accounting issue, but the governance question is whether the committee has created the conditions for candor, escalation, and disciplined inquiry.

Goldsmith's framework is useful because audit failures often have behavioral dimensions: overconfidence, deference to management, reluctance to challenge external auditors, failure to follow up, or normalization of weak signals. A QFE can use *Triggers* as a reminder that technical competence must be paired with behavioral vigilance.

Risk Governance Lens

For DCRO Institute Qualified Risk Directors, the book is a reminder that risk oversight is not simply about avoiding loss. It is about understanding uncertainty, testing assumptions, aligning risk appetite with strategy, and ensuring that management has credible processes for identifying, measuring, escalating, and responding to risk.

Triggers is relevant to risk governance because risk culture is behavioral. Organizations do not escalate emerging risks merely because a policy says they should. People escalate when leadership behavior makes it safe, expected, and valued. Boards should therefore ask whether management's behavior reinforces or undermines the stated risk appetite.

Goldsmith's emphasis on environmental triggers also maps well to risk oversight. Incentive plans, growth targets, market pressure, analyst expectations, and internal politics can all trigger risk-taking behavior that exceeds stated tolerance. Qualified Risk Directors should read the book as a behavioral complement to enterprise risk management: risk systems matter, but so do the human triggers that determine whether those systems work.

Technology / Digital / AI Oversight Lens

For Digital Directors Network Qualified Technology Experts, the relevant board question is whether management is treating technology as an operational tool, a strategic asset, a risk

vector, or all three. *Triggers* helps directors think about the behavioral side of technology oversight.

AI, cybersecurity, digital transformation, data governance, platform dependency, vendor risk, and quantum readiness are not purely technical issues. They require leadership behaviors: curiosity, transparency, speed of learning, willingness to admit gaps, and discipline in escalation. A board may have a technology dashboard, but if management is defensive about cyber readiness or overly optimistic about AI deployment, the dashboard may provide false comfort.

The book's lessons are especially relevant to AI governance. AI systems can introduce new behavioral triggers: automation bias, overreliance on model outputs, underestimation of data risk, or pressure to deploy faster than controls can mature. Directors should use Goldsmith's framework to ask how technology changes behavior across the organization—not merely how technology changes operations.

Committee-Level Implications

The book has implications across the board committee structure.

For the **Audit / Risk Committee**, the key application is behavioral discipline around controls, assurance, escalation, and challenge. Are directors asking the follow-up questions that reveal weak signals?

For the **Finance / Investment Committee**, the book raises questions about capital allocation behavior. Are management teams pursuing disciplined investment decisions, or are they being triggered by market pressure, peer comparison, or prior commitments?

For the **Technology / Cyber / Innovation Committee**, the book encourages directors to examine whether technology decisions are shaped by disciplined governance or by hype, fear of missing out, vendor influence, or executive overconfidence.

For the **Compensation / Talent Committee**, the book is directly relevant to leadership development, executive coaching, succession planning, culture, and incentive design. Are leaders rewarded only for outcomes, or also for the behaviors that make results sustainable?

For the **Nominating and Governance Committee**, the book is a useful tool for board self-assessment. It invites directors to examine whether board culture encourages preparation, candor, humility, and constructive challenge.

For the **Full Board**, the book reinforces that governance quality depends on collective behavior: how the board listens, questions, learns, escalates, and adapts.

Boardroom Questions

After reading *Triggers*, directors should ask:

1. What behaviors do we want to see more consistently from this board and from management?
2. What boardroom triggers cause us to avoid difficult questions, defer to authority, or rush to consensus?
3. Are our committee agendas designed to promote disciplined oversight or passive review?
4. What management behaviors indicate a healthy risk culture?
5. Are incentives reinforcing the behaviors we say we value?
6. How do we evaluate whether executives are learning, adapting, and responding constructively to feedback?
7. Where might success, tenure, or expertise be creating overconfidence?
8. What daily, quarterly, or annual accountability practices would make us better directors?

Metrics, Signals, and Red Flags

Directors applying the lessons of *Triggers* could monitor several indicators:

1. **Board and committee self-assessment themes**, especially recurring comments about preparation, candor, challenge, or meeting effectiveness.
2. **Internal audit and risk escalation patterns**, including whether issues are surfaced early or only after deterioration.
3. **Employee engagement and culture indicators**, especially psychological safety, trust in leadership, and willingness to speak up.
4. **Executive development metrics**, including coaching themes, succession readiness, and 360-degree feedback.
5. **Technology and cyber escalation metrics**, including unresolved high-risk findings, delayed remediation, and management defensiveness.
6. **Capital allocation post-audits**, assessing whether prior decisions were disciplined or influenced by bias, momentum, or sunk-cost behavior.

Red flags include repeated surprises, weak follow-through, defensive management responses, overly polished board materials, lack of dissent, and board discussions that consistently avoid behavioral or cultural root causes.

Practical Boardroom Application / Next 90 Days

In the next 90 days, directors could use *Triggers* in several practical ways. A board chair or lead independent director could incorporate the book into a board effectiveness discussion. A nominating and governance committee could use it to refine the board self-assessment process. A compensation committee could connect the book's ideas to executive development and succession planning. An audit or risk committee could use it to discuss whether management behavior supports transparency and escalation.

The most practical step would be to create a short set of board-level "active questions" for directors. For example: Did I do my best to prepare? Did I do my best to listen? Did I do my best to ask the question that served the company rather than my own expertise or ego? Did I do my best to help the board reach a better decision?

Limitations / Cautions

The book is strongest as a practical guide to individual behavior change. It is less focused on institutional design, governance architecture, regulatory requirements, or technical board oversight. Directors should therefore avoid treating it as a complete governance framework.

The book also places significant emphasis on personal accountability. That is valuable, but boards should remember that behavior is shaped by systems. Poor conduct may reflect individual failure, but it may also reflect flawed incentives, unclear decision rights, weak controls, or a culture that discourages challenge. The best application of *Triggers* is to combine Goldsmith's behavioral insights with rigorous governance processes.

Conclusion / Call to Action

Triggers is a valuable read for directors and senior leaders who want to improve not just what they know, but how they behave. Its core message is both simple and demanding: leadership effectiveness requires ongoing discipline, self-awareness, and accountability.

The call to action is straightforward: read the book with a pen in hand, identify the two or three behavioral patterns that most affect your effectiveness, and convert those insights into daily or weekly practices. For board directors, the goal is not self-improvement as an abstract exercise. The goal is better governance: sharper questions, stronger listening, more disciplined oversight, and a boardroom culture that improves management's decision-making.

For directors, the measure of a good leadership book is not whether it is motivational. It is whether it helps us become more effective stewards of the organizations we serve. On that standard, *Triggers* is well worth the time.

Overall Director Takeaway

The most important takeaway from *Triggers* is that board effectiveness is behavioral before it is procedural. Directors bring expertise, credentials, and experience to the boardroom, but their real contribution depends on how consistently they prepare, listen, challenge, learn, and hold themselves accountable. Goldsmith's book gives directors a practical framework for becoming more intentional, more disciplined, and more effective in the moments that matter.