
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People – by Stephen Covey

This book is becoming a cult phenomenon amongst thinking business people. I was fortunate to discover Covey's book in my local bookshop and subsequently listen to him speak to a group of around 400 business people. His personal presentation was good but his book is better. This review outlines the key issues that Covey sees as being characteristic of highly effective people. Covey has written other books on principle leadership. This concept encourages managers to identify the principles that they are using to manage themselves and their organisations. The 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' is a further extension of this work.

Covey felt that principles such as fairness, integrity, honesty, service, quality, excellence, potential, growth, patience, encouragement, were all key elements in the successful application of management. He stated that principles are not practices. A practice is a specific activity or action and whilst practice can be specific, principles are deep, fundamental truths that have universal application. These principles apply to individuals, marriages, families and organisations of every kind. Principles are guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent, value.

The Seven Habits

As Aristotle once said 'we are what we repeatedly do'. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. Our character is a composite of our habits. Habits are powerful factors in our lives because they are consistent, often unconscious patterns. Habits are the intersection of knowledge, skill and desire. Covey's seven habits are the habits of effectiveness. Because they are based on principles they bring the maximum long term beneficial results possible. They become the basis of a persons character creating an empowering centre of correct maps from which an individual can effectively solve problems, maximise opportunities, and continually learn and integrate other principles in an upward spiral of growth.

Habit One - Be Proactive

You can tell proactive people by the language they use. When people say I'll be happy when, if only I had, etc, you can tell that they are in a reactive mode. Proactive people take charge and realise that every time we think the problem is somewhere else, then that thought is the problem.

The proactive approach is to change from the inside out, to be different and by being different to affect positive change in what's out there - I can be more resourceful, I can be more diligent, I can be more creative, and I can be more co-operative.

There are some people who interpret proactive to mean pushy, aggressive, or insensitive; that isn't the case at all. Proactive people aren't pushy, they're smart, they're value driven, they read reality and they know what's needed. Knowing that we are responsible is fundamental to effectiveness and to every other habit of effectiveness covered in this article.

Habit Two - Begin with the End in Mind

The Begin with the End in Mind principle is based on the assumption that all things are created twice. There is a mental first creation and a physical or second creation to all things. A good example of this is the construction of a home where first you need to get a vision of where everything will be laid out, reduce that to a plan and then the carpenter goes about creating that vision. A business is another good example where you need to think through the product or service you want to provide, organise all the elements in terms of finance, research, operations, marketing, personnel, etc, and then go about putting substance to that plan.

The second habit is based on principles of personal leadership, which means that leadership is the first creation. Leadership is not management. Management is the second creation. In business the market is changing so rapidly that many products and services that successfully met consumer tastes and needs a few years ago are obsolete today. Proactive powerful leadership must constantly monitor environmental change, particularly customer buying habits and motives and provide the force necessary to organise resources in the right direction. Effective management without effective leadership is as one individual has phrased it 'like straightening deck chairs on the Titanic'. No management success can compensate for failure in leadership, but leadership is hard because we are often caught in a management paradigm.

Often a leader starts the process by establishing a personal mission statement. Because each individual is unique a personal mission statement will reflect that uniqueness both in the content and form. Your personal mission statement must:

Include elements such as:

- Succeed at home first
- Never compromise with honesty
- Hear both sides before judging
- Be sincere yet decisive
- Plan tomorrows work today
- Keep a sense of humour
- Facilitate the success of subordinates
- Listen twice as much as you speak

Your principles may cover issues such as:

- Money
- Work
- Possessions
- Pleasures
- Friends
- Enemies
- Church
- Self
- Family

Using your right brain visualisation and affirmation can also play a part in establishing your leadership principles.

Once you have your personal mission statement completed you may wish to consider doing a family mission statement and ultimately organisations mission statement. Mission statements are vital to successful organisations. To be effective the mission statement must come from the bowels of the organisation. Everyone should participate in a meaningful way not just the top strategy planners, but everyone. A clear understanding of a business mission at all levels ensures commitment and empowerment of people throughout the organisations.

Habit Three - Put First Things First

Before outlining this habit I would like you to think about what one thing you could do that you aren't doing now, that if you did it on a regular basis would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life. Having answered this question consider what one thing in your business or professional life would bring similar results. If you could write down those two factors we'll get back to that later in this habit.

Time management has developed significantly over the years. The best thinking in the area of time management can be captured in a single phrase 'organise and execute around priorities'. That phrase represents the evolution of three generations of time management theory and how to best do it is the focus of a wide variety of approaches and materials. The first generation could be characterised by notes and checklists, which was an effort to give some semblance of recognition to the many demands placed on our time and energy. The second generation was characterised by calendars and appointment books and this was an attempt to look ahead and to schedule attempts and activities in the future. The third generation reflects the current time management field. It adds to those proceeding generations the important idea of prioritisation or clarifying values and of comparing the relative worth of activities based on their recognition to those values. There is an emerging fourth generation that is different in kind. It recognises that time management is really a misnomer, the challenge is not to manage time but to manage ourselves. Rather than focusing on things and time, fourth generation expectations focus on preserving and enhancing relationships and on accomplishing results. The matrix on the following page outlines how time can be considered.

The key element is in quadrant two. Quadrant two activities include relationship building, recognising new opportunities, planning and even recreation. By working on category two activities the pressure from the category one activities can be reduced. People that put most of their attention into category one end up with stress, burn out, crisis management and fire fighting. Those focusing on category three have a short-term focus, see goals and plans as worthless and feel victimised and out of control. Those who spend most of their time in quadrants three and four end up being considered irresponsible and over dependent on others which quite often results in them being fired from their job. If you can spend a large majority of your time in category two activities with a balance in category one you end up with vision, perspective, balance, discipline, control and very few crises. One of the key mechanisms for making the transition to a category two person is learning to say no.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
	I	II
IMPORTANT	ACTIVITIES:	ACTIVITIES:
	Crises	Prevention, PC activities
	Pressing problems	Relationship building
	Deadline-driven projects	Recognising new opportunities
		Planning, recreation
	III	IV
NOT IMPORTANT	ACTIVITIES:	ACTIVITIES:
	Interruptions, some calls	Trivia, busy work
	Some mail, some reports	Some mail
	Some meetings	Some phone calls
	Proximate, pressing matters	Time wasters
	Popular activities	Pleasant activities

The key steps in becoming a quadrant two self-manager are as follows.

- Identify your roles.
- Schedule your time with your personal mission statement in mind.
- Daily adapting - take a few minutes each morning to review your schedule and re-prioritise your key events.

Living it - make sure you practice what you preach. As you go through your week there will undoubtedly be times when your integrity will be placed on the line. The temptation to react to the urgent but unimportant priorities of other people in quadrant three or the pleasure of escaping to quadrant four will threaten to overpower the important quadrant two activities you have planned.

Your principle centre, your self-awareness and your conscious can provide a high degree of intrinsic security; guidance and wisdom to empower you to use your independent will and maintain integrity to the truly important.

Habit Four - Think Win Win

Win win is not a technique it is a total philosophy of human interaction. In fact it is one of the six paradigms of interaction. The alternative paradigms are win lose, lose win, lose lose, win, win win or no deal.

Win win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial and mutually satisfying. With a win win solution all parties feel good about the decision and feel committed to the action plan. Win win sees life as a co-operative, not a competitive arena. Most people tend to think in terms of dichotomies, strong or weak, hard ball or soft ball, win or lose. That kind of thinking is fundamentally flawed. It is based on power and position rather than on principle.

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Win win is based on the paradigm that there is plenty for everybody, that one person's success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others.

One of the interesting options is win win or no deal. No deal basically means if we can't find a solution that would benefit us both we agree to disagree agreeably. That is no deal. No expectations have been created, no performance contracts established. When you have no deal as an option in your mind you feel liberated because you have no need to manipulate people, to push your own agenda, to drive for what you want. You can be open. You can really try to understand the deeper issues underlying the positions. With no deal as an option you can honestly say I only want to go for win win. I want to win and I want you to win. I wouldn't want to get my way and have you not feel good about it because down stream it would eventually surface and create a withdrawal. On the other hand, I don't think you would feel good if you got your way and I gave in. So lets work for a win win. Lets really hammer it out and if we can't find it then lets agree that we won't make a deal at all. It would be better not to deal than to live with a decision that wasn't right for us both. There may be another time we might be able to get together.

The win win or no deal approach is most realistic at the beginning of a business relationship or enterprise. In a continuing business relationship, no deal may not be a viable option as it can create serious problems especially for a family business or businesses that are begun initially on the basis of friendship. In an effort to preserve the relationship people have sometimes gone for years making one compromise after another thinking win lose or lose win even when talking win win. This creates serious problems for the people and for the business, particularly if the competition operates on a win win and synergy. Without 'no deal' many such businesses simply deteriorate either fail or have to be turned over to professional managers.

Experience show that it is often better in setting up a family business or a business between friends to acknowledge the possibility of no deal down stream and to establish some kind of buy sell agreements so that the business can prosper without permanently damaging the relationship.

Habit Five - Seek First To Understand, Then To Be Understood

Empathic listening is a key element in habit five. Seek first to understand involves a very deep shift in paradigm. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They are filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other people's lives. When another person speaks, we are usually listening at one of four levels. We may be ignoring another person, not really listening at all. We may practice pretending, we may practice selective listening, that is hearing only certain parts of the conversation, or we may even practice attentive listening, paying attention and focusing energy on the words that are being said.

Very few of us ever practice the fifth level, the highest form of listening, empathic listening. Empathic listening means listening with intent to understand. Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference, you look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel. Empathic listening involves much more than registering, reflecting, or even understanding the words that are said. In empathic listening you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behaviour.

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You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit, you feel. Empathic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feelings, motives and interpretation you are dealing with the reality inside another person's head and heart. You are listening to understand. You are focusing on receiving the deep communication of another human soul. In addition, empathic listening is a key to making deposits in emotional bank accounts, because nothing you do is a deposit unless the other person perceives it as such. You can work your fingers to the bone to make a deposit only to have it turn into a withdrawal when a person regards your efforts as manipulative, self-serving, intimidating or condescending because you don't understand what really matters to him. Empathic listening is, in and of itself, a tremendous deposit in the emotional bank account.

The time you invest to deeply understand the people you love brings tremendous dividends in open communication. Many of the problems that plague families and marriages simply don't have time to fester and develop. The communication becomes so open that potential problems can be nipped in the bud and there are great reserves of trust in the emotional bank account to handle problems that do arise.

In business you can set up one on one time with your employees. Listen to them, understand them. Set up human resource accounting or stakeholder information systems in your business to get honest accurate feedback at every level from customers, suppliers and employees. Make the human element as important as the financial or technical element. You save tremendous amounts of time, energy and money when you tap into the human resources of the business at every level. When you listen, you learn. You give the people who work for you and with you, psychological air. You inspire loyalty that goes well beyond the eight to five physical demands of the job.

Seek first to understand. Before the problems come up, before you try and evaluate and prescribe, before you try to present your own ideas, seek to understand. It is a powerful habit of effective independence.

Habit Six - Synergise

Synergy is everywhere in nature. If you plant two plants close together the roots commingle and improve the quality of the soil so that both plants will grow better than if they were separated. If you put two pieces of wood together they will hold much more than the total weight held by each separately. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. One plus one equals three or more. The challenge is to apply the principles of creative co-operation that we learn from nature in our social interactions. The very way that a man and woman bring a child into the world is synergistic. The essence of synergy is to value differences - to respect them, to build on strengths, to compensate for weaknesses.

Synergy is exciting, creativity is exciting, its phenomenal openness in communication can produce the possibilities of truly significant gain, of significant improvement are so real that it's worth the risk such openness entails. In an independent situation synergy is particularly powerful in dealing with negative forces that work against growth and change. Sociologist, Kurt Lewin, developed a 'force field analysis' model in which he described any current level of performance or being as a state of equilibrium between the driving forces that encourage upward movement and the restraining forces that discourage it. Driving force is generally positive, reasonable, logical, conscious and economic. Restraining forces are often negative,

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emotional, illogical, unconscious and psychological. Both sets of forces are very real and must be taken into account when dealing with change.

Synergy works closely with win win philosophy so that we can combine our strengths with others to ensure success.

Habit Seven - Sharpen The Saw

Habit seven is taking time to sharpen the saw. It surrounds the other habits because it is the habit that makes all others possible. Habit seven is preserving and enhancing the greatest asset you have. It's renewing the four dimensions of your nature, physical, spiritual, mental and social.

The physical dimension involves caring for our physical body, eating the right sorts of foods, getting sufficient rest and relaxation and exercising on a regular basis. Exercise, nutrition and stress management are all parts of this dimension. The spiritual dimension provides leadership to your life. The spiritual dimension is your core, your centre, your commitment to your value system. It is a very private area of your life and it is a supremely important one. Spiritual renewal takes an investment of time, but it's a quadrant two activity we don't really have time to neglect. This is why a personal mission statement is so important. If we have a deep understanding of our centre and our purpose we can review and recommit to it frequently.

The mental dimension covers areas like mental development and study. Education, continuing education, continually honing and expanding the mind is a vital mental renewal. It is extremely valuable to train the mind to stand apart and examine its own program. The ability to examine the programs of life against larger questions and propose other paradigms is critical. Training without such education narrows and closes the mind so that the assumptions that underlined the training are never examined. That's why it is so valuable to read broadly and to expose yourself to great minds.

The social and emotional dimensions of our lives are tied together because our emotional life is primarily, but not exclusively, developed out of and manifested in our relationships with others. I believe that a life of integrity is the most fundamental source of personal wealth. I do not agree with the popular success literature that says that self esteem is primarily a matter of mind set, of attitude, that you can psyche yourself into peace of mind. Peace of mind comes when your life is in harmony with true principles and values and in no other way. There is also the intrinsic security that comes as a result of effective interdependent living. There is security in knowing that win win solutions do exist, that life is not always either or, that there is almost always mutually beneficial third alternatives.

There is security in knowing you can step up out of your own frame of reference without giving it up, that you can really deeply understand another human being. There is security that comes when you authentically, creatively and co-operatively interact with other people and really experience those interdependent habits. There is an intrinsic security that comes from service, from helping other people in a meaningful way. One important source is your work where you see yourself in contributive and creative mode, really making a difference. Another source is anonymous service, no one knows it and no one necessarily ever will, and that's not the concern, the concern is blessing the lives of other people. Influence, not recognition becomes the motive.

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Summary

Change, real change, comes from the inside out. It doesn't come from hacking at the leaves of attitude and behaviour with quick fix personality ethic techniques. It comes from striking at the root, the fabric of our thought, the fundamental, essential paradigms, which give definition to our character and create the lens through which we see the world.

Achieving unity with our loved ones, with our friends and working associates and ourselves is the highest, best and most delicious fruit of the Seven Habits. Most of us have tasted this fruit of true unity from time to time in the past, as we have also tasted the bitter lonely fruit of disunity and we know how precious and fragile unity is.

Obviously building a character of total integrity and living the life of love and service that creates such unity isn't easy, it isn't the quick fix, but it is possible. It begins with the desire to centre our lives on correct principles, to break out of the paradigms created by other centres and the comfort zones of unworthy habits. By centring our lives on correct principles and creating a balanced focus between doing and increasing our ability to do we become empowered in the task of creating effective, useful and peaceful lives for ourselves and our posterity.

I highly recommend this book as a reference for those wanting to make a change to their lives, their fellow employees and their organisations. The Seven Habits Of Effective People by Stephen Covey is generally available in most bookshops, but if you have any trouble obtaining copies, please contact us.