

Stephen R. Covey

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey offers a holistic approach to life and work that has struck a significant chord with the perplexed manager working in turbulent times.

Stephen Covey is founder and chairman of the Covey Leadership Centre (1985) - now part of Franklin Covey - and the Institute for Principle Centred Leadership in Utah. Born in 1932, he gained an MBA from Harvard Business School and a doctorate from Brigham Young University, where he was subsequently Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Business Management.

At the Covey Leadership Centre, through his writing - chiefly *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (which has sold over 5 million copies) - and through consultancy (he was invited to Camp David by President Clinton), his message has reached millions of individuals in business, government and education.

The recurring themes in his various works are: the transforming power of principles rooted in unchanging natural laws that govern human and organisational effectiveness; adapting every aspect of one's life to accord with these principles; effective leadership; and empowerment. Here, we will concentrate on the *Seven habits of Highly Effective People*.

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

The Seven Habits are addressed to readers not only as managers but also as members of a family, and as social, spiritual, sporting and thinking individuals. The Seven Habits offer a "life-transforming prescription" which calls for a re-think of many fundamental assumptions and attitudes (paradigms).

The Seven Habits build on the fundamental concept of **interdependence**. Covey traces a personal development outline from:

- **dependence** in childhood (many people never grow out of a dependency culture) through...

- **independence** in adolescence - self assurance, developing personality and positive mental attitude, to...
- **interdependence**: recognition that the optimum outcome results from everyone giving of their best, each aiming for the common goal with shared mission and vision but freedom to use their best judgement on how to go about achieving that common goal.

Habit 1: be proactive

Covey distinguishes between *proactive people* - those who focus their efforts on things which they can do something about - and *reactive people*, who blame, accuse, behave like victims, pick on other people's weaknesses and complain about external factors over which they have no control (e.g. the weather).

Proactive people are responsible for their own lives. Covey breaks down the word responsibility into **ability** and to choose a **response**. Proactive people recognise their responsibility to make things happen. Those who allow their feelings to control their actions have abdicated responsibility and empowered their feelings. When proactive people make a mistake, they not only recognise and acknowledge their mistake, but also correct it if possible and, most importantly, learn from it.

Habit 2: begin with the end in mind

Leadership is about effectiveness - the vision of what is to be accomplished. It calls for direction (in every sense of the word), purpose and sensitivity. *Management* on the other hand is about efficiency - how best to accomplish the vision. It depends on control, guidance and rules.

To identify the end, and to formulate one's route or strategy to achieving that end, Covey maintains the need for a Principle Centred basis to all aspects of life. Most people adopt something as the basis (or pivotal point) of their life - spouse, family, money, church, pleasure, friends (and in a perverse way, their enemies), sport, etc. Of course all of these have some influence over the life of every individual. However, only by clearly establishing one's own principles, in the form of a personal mission, does one have a solid foundation.

Habit 3: put first things first

Covey's first major work *First Things First* set out his views on time management. It is not a case of managing time, but of managing oneself, focusing on results rather than on methods in prioritising within each compartment of work and life.

He breaks down life's activities into four quadrants:

Quadrant 1: Urgent and important - e.g. crises, deadlines, unexpected opportunities

Quadrant 2: Not urgent, but important - e.g. planning, recreation, relationship-building, doing, learning

Quadrant 3: Urgent, but not important - e.g. interruptions, meetings

Quadrant 4: Not urgent and not important - e.g. trivia, time wasters, gossip.

Essentially all activity of effective people should focus on the second quadrant, apart from the genuinely unpredictable quadrant 1 events. However effective planning and doing in Quadrant 2 should minimise the number of occasions on which crises occur.

The outcomes of a Quadrant 2 focus include: vision, perspective, balance, discipline and control. On the other hand, the results of functioning within the other quadrants are:

Quadrant 1: stress, burn-out, inability to manage time (and thus loss of control of one's own life)

Quadrant 3: short-termism, loss of control, shallowness, feelings of being a victim of circumstances

Quadrant 4: irresponsibility, dependency, unsuitability for employment.

Habit 3 is therefore about managing oneself effectively, by prioritising according to the principles adopted in Habit 2. This approach transcends the office diary or day-planner, embracing all roles in life - as manager, mentor, administrator, strategist, and also as parent, spouse, member of social groups and as an individual with needs and aspirations.

Habits 1 - 3 are grouped under the banner "Private Victory" . They are about the development of personal attributes which provide the foundations for independence. Habits 4 - 6 are described by Covey as the "Public Victory", as they are the basic paradigms of **interdependence**.

Habit 4: think win/win

Interdependence occurs when there is cooperation, not competition, in the workplace (or the home). Covey holds that competition belongs in the market place.

Covey points out that, from childhood, many people are conditioned to a win/lose mentality by school examinations, by parental approval rationed to 'success', by eternal comparisons and league tables. This results in a "Scarcity Mentality", a belief that there is only a finite cake to be shared: a "Scarcity Mentality" is evident in people who have difficulty in sharing recognition or credit, power or profit. It restricts their ability to celebrate other people' success, and even brings about a perverse satisfaction over others' misfortune.

By contrast Covey advocates an "abundance Mentality" which:

- recognises the unlimited possibilities for positive growth and development
- celebrates success, recognising that one person's success is not achieved at the expense, or to the exclusion, of others
- understands and seeks a win/win solution.

Covey argues that to be true to your ideals, it is sometimes necessary to walk away, if the other party is interested only in a win/lose outcome: Covey describes this as "win/win or no deal".

Habit 5: seek first to understand, then to be understood

"I just can't understand my son .. he won't listen to me". The absurdity of this statement is highlighted by Covey in emphasising the importance of listening in order to understand. Clearly the parent needs to stop and listen to the son if they truly want to understand him.

However most people want to make their point first, or are so busy looking for their opportunity to butt into the conversation that they fail to hear and understand the other party. Covey defines the different levels of listening as:

1. Hearing but ignoring
2. Pretending to listen ("Yes", "Oh", "I see.. ")
3. Selective listening (choosing to hear only what we want to hear)
4. Attentive listening, without evaluation (e.g. taking notes at a lecture)
5. Empathic listening (with intent to understand the other party).

True empathic listening requires a great deal of personal security, as one is vulnerable to being influenced, to having one's opinions changed. "The more deeply you understand other people", Covey says, "the more you appreciate them, the more reverent you feel about them".

Likewise when you feel that someone is genuinely seeking to understand your point of view, you recognise and share their openness and willingness to negotiate and to reach a win/win situation.

Habit 6: synergise

The essence of synergy is where two parties, each with a different agenda, value one another's differences. Everything in nature is synergistic, with every creature and plant being interdependent with others.

We also have personal effectiveness where there is synergy at an individual level - where both sides of the brain are working in tandem on a problem or situation: the intuitive, creative, visual right side, and the analytical, logical verbal left side combining to achieve the optimum outcome.

Synergy is lacking in insecure people: they either clone others, or else try to stereotype them. Of such insecurity is born prejudice - racism, bigotry, nationalism and any other form of pre-judging others.

Habit 7: sharpen the saw

The seventh and final habit is about renewal: just as a motor car or any other sophisticated tool needs regular care and maintenance, so too do the human body and mind.

Covey's metaphor is about a woodcutter who is labouring painfully to saw down a tree. The saw is obviously in need of sharpening, but when asked why he doesn't stop and sharpen the saw, the woodcutter replies "I can't stop - I'm too busy sawing down this tree".

The warning is quite clear. Everyone can become so engrossed in the task in hand that the basic tools are neglected:

- `the physical self' - which requires exercise, a sensible and balanced diet, and management of stress;
- `the social/emotional self' - which connects with others through service, empathy, synergy and which is the source of intrinsic security;
- `the spiritual self' - which through meditation, reflection, prayer and study helps to clarify and refine our own values and strengths, and our commitment to them;
- `the mental self' - building on to our formal education through reading, visualising, planning, writing, and maintaining a coherent programme of continuing personal development.

In perspective

Commentators have both attacked and applauded Covey's approach for mixing the self-help message which can be traced back to Samuel Smiles, the positive self-drive of winning friends and influencing people (Dale Carnegie), current management theories and religious fervour.

In times of change and confusion, however, when failure, redundancy and unemployment dominate individual thinking and lead to stress, Covey's message offers the individual something to hang on to. First Things First, co-authored with Roger and Merrill, has achieved twice the sales of the Seven Habits over the same time period.

He is undoubtedly a philosopher for our times, highlighting the significance of changing industrial and human relations in this post-confrontational era, and recognising the potential of the untapped resources within each individual .

Key works by Covey

Books

The seven habits of highly effective people,

Stephen S Covey

New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989

Principle centred leadership, Stephen S Covey

London: Simon and Schuster, 1992

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