

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People Summary

By Stephen Covey

Seven is the magic number in Stephen Covey's popular and holistic approach to developing personal and interpersonal effectiveness.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, argues that *who we are*, matters more than *what we say or do*. It provides an inside-out approach to self-improvement, through the conceptualization of habits. These habits are consistent character-forming patterns that form the intersection of knowledge, skill, and desire.

Knowledge helps us to know what to do, and why we do it. Skill is our how, and motivation, or desire, leads us to action.

Stephen Covey, an American educator, author, and businessman, earned an MBA from Harvard and a Ph.D. in Religious Education from Brigham Young University. Seven Habits dates back to 1989, but the principles are timeless. When Covey was asked how he came up with the Seven Habits, he claimed that he didn't. According to him, they're natural laws that have been around forever, and he merely put them in written form. He hopes that these habits will serve as anchors to provide a sense of purpose, peace of mind, and rewarding relationships.

We'll briefly examine the habits that make us effective. However, these habits are not piecemeal, but rather provide a sequential and integrated approach to developing our effectiveness. Covey views them as moving us along a Maturity Continuum, from dependence to independence, and

finally to the end goal of interdependence. He believes that interdependence is the crucial system that governs nature and human life - a 'we' paradigm - where we combine to create something of greater significance. By providing us with the tools, the only thing that we need to commit to, is progressing along this continuum in a conscious and focused way.

Adopting New Habits Requires a Paradigm Shift

How we see the world dramatically shapes our view of life.

Let's look at this experiment as an example. Two groups of people are shown two different drawings. One group sees a picture of a beautiful young woman, and the other is shown a frail older woman. After initial exposure to one of these images, both groups are shown one picture of a more abstract drawing. This drawing actually contains elements of both the young woman, and the frail older lady. Invariably, the group that initially saw a young woman's picture, see the young woman in the more abstract drawing. Those who looked at the older lady first, then saw her image in the next drawing. Each group believed that they objectively evaluated the pictures.

The point is that we see things not as they are, but rather how we are, and how we are conditioned to adopt a certain paradigm. To make lasting changes, we need to be aware of basic paradigms that govern how we see the world. We may first need to change ourselves before we can alter a situation. And to change ourselves, our paradigms may need to shift.

Covey's Own Paradigm Shift

During his studies, Covey researched success literature that spanned more than 200 years. He noticed that since the 1920s, the focus had been, on tactical advice about developing personality traits, skills, and positive attitudes. Covey calls this the "Personality Ethic." The difficulty is that the self-help industry has, for almost a century, catered to this Personality Ethic. Some familiar catchphrases are self-validating maxims such as, 'our attitude determines our altitude,' or, 'smiling wins more friends than frowning.' This Personality Ethic approach, offers techniques and quick fixes, that target our pull towards our social image. And while the Personality Ethic may benefit our short-term success, in specific circumstances, these are merely secondary, and not primary traits.

Here's an example to illustrate the difference between primary and secondary traits. Suppose we're in Chicago, and we use a map to find a particular destination in the city. We may have excellent secondary skills when it comes to reading and navigation, but we'll never reach our destination if we have a map of Detroit. Having the right map is crucial to finding our way, and we need this before putting our secondary skills to the test.

Whereas research after the 1920s focused on Personality Ethic, research before the 1920s focused on Character Ethic. Character Ethic is the foundation that underpins success. Efficacy in both our personal and professional lives, depends on underlying characteristics such as integrity, courage, justice, and patience. When what we do and say, is in harmony with who we are, then we're at our best. While many of us appear to be outwardly successful and happy, often our inner hunger is always there. It's in our nature to have a deep need for personal

congruence and effectiveness, and healthy evolving relationships with other people.

The Importance of Character Ethic

Character Ethic forms the basis of the Seven Habits, and it moves us from private victories, to public victories.

The first three habits deal with self-mastery - moving us from dependence to independence. They're private victories, and they center on character growth. These habits are, 'Be Proactive,' 'Begin with the End in Mind,' and 'Put First Things First.'

Because they form the basis of independence, they necessarily precede the following three habits, which make up the Public Victories. The focus shifts to cooperation, communication, and collaboration. These habits are: 'Think, Win-Win,' 'Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood,' and 'Synergize.' The seventh Habit is about renewal and continual self-improvement, and embodies all of the other habits. This final habit is called: 'Sharpen the Saw.'

Given the nature of these habits, there are no shortcuts or quick fixes. It's an ongoing process of personal growth and change. But sustainable success is tied to acting according to our values and principles. So let's briefly unpack the Seven Habits.

Habit 1: Be Proactive

The word responsibility can be broken up into, 'response-able.' This shift

focuses on our ability to choose our response to a given stimulus or situation. A practical example of being proactive, is focusing time and energy on what we can control, rather than what we can't. Imagine two concentric circles. Let's start with the outer ring, which in this case is the Circle of Concern. Here we list all our concerns, which can range from the telephone bill, to climate change. Now picture a smaller, inner circle, called the Circle of Influence. This encompasses those concerns that we can actually do something about. Proactive people focus time and energy, on their Circle of Influence, but reactive people tend to neglect this circle, worrying instead about things that they can't alter. Gaining an awareness of the circles, in which we tend to expend our energies, is an essential step to being more proactive.

Victor Frankl, a famous psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, said that: 'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'

So to summarize, Habit One helps us to take responsibility and develop self-determination. Let's look at how Habit Two leads to developing a long term vision, keeping us proactive and aligned with what's most important.

Habit 2: Start with the End in Mind

The only constant in life, is change, and it's our values and goals that keep us anchored. By developing a principle-centered mission statement, we ensure that even the smallest actions are in line with our desired destination. It's like building a house - we start with a blueprint before we begin construction. It's about identifying the big picture, figuring out who you want to be, what you want to do, and the core values that govern

your character and behavior. These serve as a constant reminder of our long-term goals and values.

However, this process takes time, and we need creativity and logic to help us out. Visualization and imagination are useful. The more vivid the mental picture, the more exact our daily actions will be.

You can begin this process by jotting down notes, ideas, and quotes. It might also be helpful to think about all the roles that you take on, and which you hold dear. An extreme way of thinking about this is to picture your own funeral, and imagine what family, colleagues and friends will say about your life. You could then write down what you'd like them to say about who you hope to become, and the life that you'd like to lead.

An overall vision such as this, empowers us to shape our own lives, instead of living by default, or living a life that's based on the expectations of others. So now that we've developed a big picture focus, we can zoom into the smaller daily details, of how best to manage our time and our priorities.

Habit 3: First Things First

In order to manage time effectively for our long term benefit, we need to focus on what's important, and deal with that first. Our activities can be split into two categories, namely urgent, and important.

We're given a time management matrix to identify the important actions to take care of, instead of other things that we can delegate, or simply deal with later. There are four quadrants to the time matrix.

When we do things that are both important and urgent, we spend time in quadrant one. This is when we're constantly in crisis and putting out fires. Too much time spent here leads to burnout. Quadrant three is where we spend most of our time on urgent, but unimportant activities. These activities appear to be urgent, and are often based on the expectations of others. These tasks are things like responding to emails, calls, and pop-up meetings, and they often leave us feeling out of control. Then there's quadrant four. Quadrant four is where we fall into the trap of spending too much time doing things that are neither urgent, nor important. These are tasks or activities that are trivial timewasters - like web surfing, or scrolling through social media. The goal is to spend most of our time in quadrant two - these are important, but less urgent matters. This is where we work on meaningful projects, build relationships, and plan. This quadrant means we're thinking ahead, and preventing crises from happening in the first place. It's helpful to reflect on which quadrant we tend to spend most of our time in. Once we've discovered this, we can think about when we need to say 'no,' or to learn to delegate effectively.

The key to Habit 3, is not to prioritize our schedule, but to schedule our priorities. Habits 4, 5, and 6, help us transition from independence, to interdependence, and cultivate teamwork, collaboration, and communication skills.

Habit 4: Think Win-Win

A Win-Win paradigm aims to find a mutually beneficial solution, where everyone is happy with the decision, and committed to a plan. It's about mutual respect and mutual benefit.

There are six paradigms of human interaction, with a Win-Win approach

being the most effective. The problem is that we often think of negotiations in terms of either-or paradigms, like 'I Win, you Lose,' or 'I Lose, you Win.' Adopting such an approach means that one person seems to get what they want at that moment, but the results may negatively impact the future relationship. Win-Win is about dropping competitiveness, opting for kindness towards another's needs, and finding the courage to meet one's own needs. It's adopting an abundance mindset - that there's plenty out there for everyone. It might help to think about an upcoming interaction where you'll be attempting to reach an agreement or solution. Write down a list of what the other person is looking for. Then write down how you can offer to meet those needs.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood

Empathic listening is vital in meeting the needs of others. We all need to work on understanding other people's perspectives first, and only then help them understand yours. That's the only way to reach a mutually beneficial solution in a win-win paradigm.

We spend numerous years learning to speak, read, and write, but we're seldom taught to listen. Communication experts estimate that what we say represents only 10% of our communication, our tone represents 30%, and our body language represents a whopping 60%. So empathic listening isn't just about listening to words; it's also attending to the feelings, behaviors, and meaning behind them. One way to practice this is to observe a conversation, and move our focus from the words, to the emotions that we feel are being communicated.

Habit 6: Synergize

When we understand and value others then we can work towards synergy, which is the act of working together, in order to achieve better results. This habit requires openness and respect, which are developed in Habit 4 and 5.

It's important to realize that people see the world not as it is, but as they are. When we leverage our diverse perspectives, we feed off new ideas and create new possibilities to solve difficult problems. We also end up with a transformation, as opposed to a transaction. Everyone wins, cementing relationships in the process. Mastering independence and interdependence is lifelong work.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

Habit 7 helps us to sustain this development, and It's about self-renewal. Renewal empowers us to move along an upward spiral of growth and continuous improvement. Here's an analogy. If lumberjacks spent all their time sawing down trees, but never paused to sharpen their saws, they would soon be unable to fell a tree with their blunt tools. Similarly, if we don't pause to take care of ourselves, any gains in our effectiveness would be short-lived. We'd be too exhausted to stick to our good habits.

To truly sharpen our saws, it may help to write down activities that contribute to our well-being. Look at this in terms of the four dimensions. We need to consider our physical, spiritual, mental, and social-emotional wellbeing. So, every week, why not commit to at least one of these domains. It's essential to do this because recuperating and recharging is

how we sustain our effectiveness.

In Conclusion

When you look back on your life, what do you think you'll focus on?

Covey says, 'how many people on their deathbeds, wished they'd spent more time at the office—or watching TV? The answer is... no one. They think about their loved ones, their families, and those they have served.'

We might find ourselves in the 'thick of things' as we do more, try to be more, and achieve greater efficiency through modern technological advances. So it's important to remember Stephen Covey's words: 'Change - real change - comes from the inside out. 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.'

So, how do you view the world, and what changes do you want to implement?