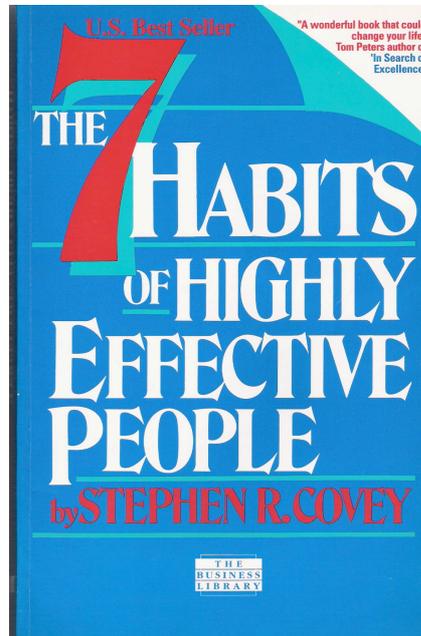

BOOK REVIEW

"The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Dr Stephen R. Covey

Simon & Schuster: New York 1989
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[Paperback for around US\$9.32
on www.amazon.com for a new copy;
US\$2.87 for a used copy
Audio CD for US\$20.59]

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I am continually surprised at the various workshops that I run on topics like "Coping with Stress" or "Time Management" when I get to the part describing the four quadrants of time that Dr Covey outlines and I ask, "Who has heard of Dr Stephen Covey and who knows what his best seller book is called" and there are only a few hands that are raised.

Why does this surprise me? Because Covey's book has been a best seller for the last 25 years. It has sold over 15 million copies in 38 languages since first publication, which was marked by the release of a 15th anniversary edition in 2004. Not bad going. And as we know, you don't get a best seller over that period of time if the content is not both relevant and appealing.

So, what is it about this book that has stood the test of time? As the title suggests, it highlights the good habits we that all need to cultivate in order to be personal leaders in our own lives. Dr Covey argues that our character is basically a composite of our habits. *"Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character, reap a destiny."* In other words, habits are powerful influencers in our lives. Powerful because they sit in the sub-conscious and you just automatically act or behave without really thinking about it. A bit like cleaning your teeth, showering or tying up your

shoe laces; you just do it now without much thought. So, you can imagine what life would be like if you somehow or other, you learned a whole lot of bad habits, or even a few bad habits. Life becomes a struggle. Failure looms too often. Sabotage is a frequent foe. Even though you might be well-intentioned and you might say, "Damn it, I won't let that happen again," when the next time comes around, there you go again, slipping up in the same way as before. How come? Because it is a habit.

Stephen Covey therefore argues for what he terms a "paradigm shift" where we need not to just learn new skills or gain more knowledge, but instead, change our thought processes or our mental map. He calls these "principles." Covey gives his own story of a mini-paradigm shift when was sitting on a subway in New York one Sunday morning. People were sitting quietly, reading the paper, aimlessly looking around. Suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were loud and raucous and in an instance, the atmosphere changed. The man sat next to Covey and closed his eyes apparently oblivious to his children. The children were yelling, throwing things, and even grabbing people's papers. They were very disruptive and yet the man next to Covey did nothing. It was irritating. Finally, Covey could take it no longer and turning to the man he said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people and I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more." The man lifted his gaze as if to come to some sort of consciousness for the first time and said softly, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either." Covey says that in a flash, his paradigm shifted. Suddenly, he saw things differently and because he saw things differently, he thought differently, he felt differently, and he behaved differently. His irritation vanished. He felt sympathy and compassion towards this man and his situation. Everything changed in an instant.

What are these principles that bring about a new mind map that create in us new habits for effective living?

Habits 1, 2 and 3 are about self-mastery and are "private victories" where you become independent. **Habit 1** is "Be Proactive" which demonstrates that change starts from within, and highly effective people make the decision to improve their lives through the things that they can influence rather than by simply reacting to external situations. **Habit 2** is "Begin with the End in Mind" which urges us to develop a personal mission statement for ourselves. If it's good enough companies, then it's good enough for us to develop mission statements that then translate into goals to strive towards. **Habit 3** is "Put First

Things First" which is about doing the most important things in life rather than being distracted by the minor things or simply reacting to that which is urgent.

Habits 4, 5 and 6 are about the more personality-oriented "public victories" of teamwork, cooperation, and communication which is the foundation for interdependence. **Habit 4** is "Think Win/Win" where we need to seek agreements and relationships that are mutually beneficial. In developing an organisational culture for example, it is important to reward win/win behaviour amongst employees and avoid inadvertently rewarding win/lose behaviour. **Habit 5** is "Seek First to Understand, Then to Be understood" which is about listening and understanding in the first instance, before then trying to be understood yourself. Covey sees this principle of listening as the most important in interpersonal relations. **Habit 6** is "Sharpen the Saw" which is all about looking after yourself and achieving a work/life balance.

This book is really a must for everyone. No matter whether you might be seeking to increase your own personal skills and to enhance your own personal leadership or whether you happen to be leading a team or group of some description, the principles and habits outlined in this book will serve you well both in life itself as well as in the workplace. If you want a down to earth and common sense approach to life and to understand some of the factors that bring about success, then this book is it.

This book has stood the test of time because the principles outlined are about aligning oneself to what Covey calls "true north" principles of a character ethic that he believes to be universal and timeless. In a sense this book itself is universal and timeless.

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