The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: A Critical Analysis

By Michael Doughty

For David Orr

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First Impressions

My first introduction to The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People was by a supervisor at my first job working in television in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. He gave everyone on staff a copy of the book, asked us to read and summarize the key concepts, and then asked us to present our findings. I dutifully completed the assignment, wondering several times what a self-help book on management had to do with running a television station. When we were discussing the book later I asked my boss why he had chosen 7 Habits. Surely there was some insight into broadcasting to be gleaned from its pages. His response was disheartening. “I don’t know what the problem is; this book will tell us how to fix it.”

From those misguided beginnings, my relationship with 7 Habits began. Occasionally I would hear terms like “Win-Win” or “Synergize” and I would recall Covey’s writing. However it is only through a major life and career transition that I have come to understand the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People as a valuable tool and guide to achieving goals. I have continually referred back to the 7 Habits in various areas of my life.

Inside Out

What I appreciate most about Covey’s book is that unlike many “self-help” books on the market, Covey does not offer quick fixes. “…if you don’t pay the price day in and day out, you never achieve true mastery of the subjects you study or develop an educated mind (Covey, 2004, p. 22).” Covey emphasizes that true change doesn’t come from changing your environment or
your co-workers behaviours. Lasting change only occurs when you adjust your perceptions (paradigms) to discover the true root of a problem.

Covey provides a definition of habit as “the intersection of knowledge, skill, and desire (Covey, 2004, p. 47).” Anybody can change. Most people possess one or two of the criteria necessary to change. In my own life I always knew why I was overweight (knowledge) and I wanted to lose weight to improve my health (desire). However, it wasn’t until I hired a trainer and learned the skills of proper nutrition that all three elements came together and I was able to make substantial change and lose a significant amount of weight. Put another way, I lacked the production capabilities in the form of information in order to produce the desired product, lasting weight loss and health.

Be Proactive

Most people would define being proactive as taking initiative. Covey turns the definition around and defines being proactive as taking responsibility. He breaks the word down to its roots, “response-ability,” meaning that as human beings we have to ability to decide how we will respond to situations. We can suppress our instincts and choose a measured, thoughtful response rather than an impulsive, emotional response. In this way we take our first step along the maturity continuum from dependence towards independence.

After eight years as a long haul truck driver I finally took an extended vacation in 2012. I spent a month decompressing, trying to figure out what I wanted out of my job and my life. After a week of feeling sorry for myself about where my life was heading I woke up one morning and simply said to myself, “today is going to be better than yesterday.” I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I was determined to follow it through. I knew that if anything was going to
change in my life, I had to be proactive in making that change a reality. I stopped asking “why is this happening to me” and focused on “how can I make this happen?”

Without being aware of it I had identified the one thing that I could change, and I had identified my circle of influence. The one thing that I could change immediately was my attitude. One decision to become proactive in my life led to hiring a trainer, something I had been putting off for over a year. Suddenly there were two people in my circle, and we were both working on expanding the circle. As the weeks went by and I kept following through, challenges that seemed impossible at the beginning became smaller obstacles that I looked forward to tackling.

**Begin with the End in Mind**

Covey describes an exercise that I have participated in many times in various training scenarios. Visualize the end of your life, and imagine what you want people to say about you. While the idea may seem morbid, the principle is sound. Figure out what you want to achieve, and then work backwards. Sports psychologists use this technique with high performance athletes. They first visualize themselves winning a gold medal. Then they ask, “what happened just before you got to the podium?” Through this process of working backwards from the top, the athlete shifts their paradigm. They have already seen their achievement, and all the steps that it took to get to that spot before they begin training. They have created the map to their success in their mind.

I have tried writing a mission statement as Covey describes. It is a challenging process. I have written goals and the steps I will take to achieve them. Covey suggests that merely writing out a goal is not enough. Unless that goal is backed up by a solid understanding of who you are
and what you want to achieve, the goal is just words on paper. “Without involvement, there is no commitment.” (Covey, 2004, p. 143) In our recent Business Case Competition, our team from the outset saw ourselves winning the top prize. We then looked at what other teams had done and determined the level of effort and commitment it would require to earn the same result. By the time we went on stage to present our case, we knew that we had done everything we could in order to reach our goal.

**Put First Things First**

This is where Covey outlines his Time Management Matrix (Covey, 2004, p. 151). While it is simple to identify potential time wasting activities, I find the most difficult challenge is in saying no. Covey suggests that saying no not only requires a clear vision of what we want to accomplish (Habit 2), but also personal courage to stand up for that vision and prevent outside influences from interfering with our ability to pursue it. Covey uses a computer metaphor: “if Habit 1 says “You’re the programmer” and Habit 2 says “Write the program,” then Habit 3 says “Run the program” (Covey, 2004, p. 169)

In my weight loss journey I have personally employed Covey’s strategy of weekly planning in order to prioritize my daily activities. Every week I go food shopping with an organized list. On Sunday, I prepare all my meals for the week. I cook batches of rice, chicken, make salads and pack everything into containers. All of this preparation accomplishes two important things. It keeps me focused on my meal plan by excluding anything that is not going to provide nutrition. And every day when I go to the fridge, I see my daily meals laid out in front of me. With those tasks out of the way, the decisions of what to eat and when are taken out of my hands, allowing me to focus my attention on more important matters. I am able to say no
to temptations which might deter me from reaching my goals because I have previously written and run the program.

**Think Win-Win**

Win-Win means finding a solution that is mutually beneficial to all involved. This way of thinking requires “the ability to express one’s own feeling and convictions, balanced with consideration for the thoughts and feelings of others (Covey, 2004, p. 217).” Win-Win solutions focus on the specific outcomes desired, not the methods used to achieve them. They identify or employ all the resources available. They have clearly defined standards of accountability, and the consequences for not achieving the desired results are understood by all parties.

I have encountered many organizations that preach Win-Win, but practice some form of Win-Lose. As a customer care manager with StarChoice Satellite (now Shaw Direct), we were encouraged and trained our employees to think Win-Win with every customer interaction. One promotion involved $1000 to the employee who sold the most Ultimate channel packages in a month. The problem was that more than 80% of our subscribers were subscribed to lesser packages.

The complaint I heard most often from customers during this campaign was that the employees were not listening to what the customers wanted and instead hard selling them on something they clearly didn’t need. Usually after a brief cooling off period, I would speak with the customer about their viewing preferences and recommend a channel tier that fit their needs. More often than not it involved a lesser upgrade than the Ultimate package. Even though it went against the spirit of the promotion, I felt it was the right thing to do for customers. We kept a
paying customer, and the customer got what they wanted without feeling pressured or taken advantage of.

**Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood**

Seeking to understand before being understood is about opening up to all forms of verbal and nonverbal communication in order to gain a more complete picture of a particular problem. Covey explains that context can be misinterpreted, and that someone may be talking about one issue but referring to a more complex problem. It is about building trust, empathizing, clarifying as needed, and then doing the same in reverse to express your own position. This is the one area of the 7 Habits that I disagree with Covey. It is not with this particular habit, but with the order of the habits. I find it difficult to arrive at a Win-Win solution without first listening to and then communicating with a person to gain a full understanding of the real issue.

Many years ago I volunteered as a counsellor on a suicide crisis phone line. While we were trained in aspects of mental health, our primary roles were as impartial, non-judgmental listeners. Often times what a person in emotional crisis needs most is a sounding board. The problem solving can often wait until the individual has been fully heard and understood. Some of the most difficult calls involved individuals who felt like they had no one in their lives that would take the time to listen. Through a process of guided listening, we would figuratively climb down into the hole with the caller. Once you see a problem from that perspective, you gain an appreciation for how difficult it can be for some people to figure a way out on their own.

This is what Covey calls Pathos, being “in alignment with the emotional thrust of another person’s communication (Covey, 2004, p. 255).” Ethos is the faith people have in you, and Logos is the logic of your presentation. It would be very tempting to jump to the logical solution
to a caller’s problem, to provide them with a Win-Win scenario. By doing this, we would be doing the same thing that every other person in the caller’s life had done. We would be minimizing their experience and recommending a course of action without first hearing the caller out.

To be sure, this process can be painstaking and time consuming. I can appreciate that Covey would not readily recommend listening to a co-worker or client for an hour or more without saying anything. But in most cases, at the end of that long period, the Win-Win scenario didn’t come from the volunteers. It came from the caller who, perhaps for the first time, had a chance to fully identify their problem, figure out their ideal solution using resources we could provide to them if needed, and put the solution into terms that they could understand and implement.

**Synergize**

Creating synergy is the final step in the transition from independence to interdependence. It combines all of the other 5 habits, along with the understanding that an individual is only capable of accomplishing so much on his or her own. True interdependence comes from combining the efforts of multiple parties to come up with what Covey calls the third alternative. You and I may have our own ideas for how to solve a problem individually. By combining our efforts and following the principles of the previous five habits, we can arrive at a Win-Win solution that neither individual could achieve separately.

“Synergy means that 1 + 1 may equal 8, 16, or even 1600. The synergistic position…produces solutions better than any originally proposed, and all parties know it. Furthermore, they genuinely enjoy the creative enterprise. A miniculture is formed to satisfy in and of itself (Covey, 2004, p. 271).”
I admit I have difficulty with this habit. For many years, I have worked independently as a truck driver. I would receive an assignment via satellite message, and then the rest was entirely up to me. I would plan my route, determine the best places to purchase fuel, contact the customer to arrange delivery or get directions. If there was a mechanical problem with my equipment I was the one who arranged for repairs, figuring out the best way to get the work done while keeping to an always difficult schedule.

The difficulty with synergy is that it requires two like minds coming together to achieve a greater common purpose. You cannot force someone into interdependence. A competitive industry such as trucking is highly reactive or dependent, controlled by forces outside of its circle of influence such as government regulations, customer demands and unforeseen delays. My greatest frustration as a driver came from the unwillingness of my supervisors to move past the details and see the bigger picture. While my objective was safe, on-time delivery to satisfy the customer, my supervisors focused on delays and border issues (quadrant I issues) that could not be immediately controlled. Even though we were on the same team, we could never arrive at a Win-Win because of the gap between dependence and independence.

**Sharpen the Saw**

Covey’s final habit refers to an ongoing process of learning, committing and doing that incorporates all of the other six habits. By planning, focusing on the things within our circle of influence, and applying the habits that lead to public victory, we strengthen our ability to live the 7 Habits on a daily basis. As with any endeavour, Covey emphasizes that the 7 Habits are a set of skills that need to be practiced in order to be perfected.
Sharpening the saw also means doing that which is necessary to nourish ourselves physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally. Covey says, “Habit 7 is personal PC (production capacity). It’s preserving and enhancing the greatest asset you have – you (Covey, 2004, p. 288).”

This is where 7 Habits becomes more of a self-help book and less of a guide. Covey seems to imply that by constantly sharpening the saw, the other six habits will simply fall into place. While I agree with the principle, Covey’s attempts at providing physical fitness tips, for example, fell flat with me. Again, I feel as though Covey has his habits out of order. If you have accomplished the previous 6 habits you should, in theory, already be sharpening your saw. The Taoist principle of Wu Wei, doing by not doing, suggests that if you have properly laid the groundwork to accomplish your task, the task will accomplish itself.

Summary

I have referred to The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People at various points in my life. Taken separately, each habit can be useful in its own right to solve a problem or gain clarity of a situation. When taken together, however, the 7 Habits provide a framework for managing the personal and public dimensions of yourself in order to achieve greater things. In choosing to return to college and commit to a healthier lifestyle, I feel that I have been incorporating many of the 7 Habits without being consciously aware of them. Being able to put a name to the process gives me confidence that the things I am doing on a daily basis to accomplish my goals are working.