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### **Book Review – The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey**

This classic personal effectiveness book is one of my all-time favorites. I just read it for the third time, and believe everyone should read it at least once per decade. The book examines seven essential habits for personal effectiveness, giving detailed explanations and using real-life stories to illustrate. Dr. Covey did an extensive review of the American literature of self-improvement and found that the earlier literature (the Puritans through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) focused more on character, while the twentieth century literature focused more on techniques. There is nothing wrong with learning techniques for success, but only if we start with the foundation of the proper character. Accordingly, the Seven Habits focus more on the type of person we are (or are becoming) than tricks to get people to like us or do what we want. He also introduces the concept of a paradigm, which is a mental model for how we see the world. We are often not aware of our own paradigms, but they influence our conclusions by determining how we view the facts. A habit is defined as “the intersection of knowledge, skill and desire.” We need to know what to do and how to do it, and we need to want to do it.

The first three habits are habits of inner change. They are done by the individual. The next three habits are for how we deal with others. Until we master the habits of inner change, we will likely not be successful at the next three habits.

The first habit is to be proactive. Between every stimulus and response, there is a decision. We may simply react without deliberately deciding how to react, but we have the opportunity to choose. By exercising this choice, we become an active participant and not a victim. Covey referenced Victor Frankl who was a Jewish Psychiatrist who was interred in a Nazi concentration camp. He learned that while his captors could control almost everything about his life, they couldn't control his mind. He still got to choose how he reacted. This gave him an element of freedom that preserved him through that terrible time. We will never grow unless we take responsibility for what we can control and acknowledge that we are responsible. We need to focus on our circle of influence (things we can change) instead of our circle of concern (things we care about.) As we do, we will see our circle of influence grow so that we will be able to impact other things we care about. Dr. Covey aptly states, “While we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose the consequences of those actions.” This first habit is foundational for the next six habits.

The second habit is to begin with the end in mind. “The carpenter’s rule is ‘measure twice, cut once.’” Covey states that everything is created twice – first in the mind and then in reality. Leadership is all about knowing where we are going. Management is about efficiency. Efficiency is important – but only if we are going in the right direction. Covey suggests that we not only apply this principle to projects, but to our lives in general. When we think about how we want to be remembered, or how we want to look back on our lives, we can have clarity

about what to do today. A personal mission statement is a good tool to help articulate this and to keep us focused.

The third habit is put first things first. There are endless tasks and chores, so prioritization is essential. Covey introduces The Time Management Matrix. Vertically, everything is divided into important and not important. Horizontally, the division is urgent and not urgent. Quadrant I (upper left) is urgent and important. Quadrant II is not urgent and important. Quadrant III is urgent, but not important. Quadrant IV is not urgent, not important. Time in the bottom quadrants is mostly wasted. Too much time in Quadrant I leads to burnout. It's best to try to spend time in Quadrant II, which is where relationships, improving our skills, planning, recreation, prevention, and finding new opportunities are located. Spending time there keeps us focused on what is important, and getting things done before they become urgent. Covey suggests listing all the different roles we have (e.g. father, husband, boss, volunteer, etc.) and having goals for each and making sure we take time for each. Daily scheduling is too short-term. Weekly is much better. Start by scheduling priorities and let other things fit into the cracks. One important (and challenging) part of putting first things first is to graciously say "no".

The fourth habit is the first of the "public victory" habits. Think win/win. Win/win isn't compromise – it's trying to find a better solution that meets the needs of both parties. Many people go for win/lose – they want to win a negotiation or interaction, and to do so at the expense of others. This is a long-term losing strategy, even if it can work for a while. People will avoid you. A business that makes its suppliers lose may eventually lose its suppliers when they go out of business. At the very least, they will not be priority customers, and the suppliers won't try to find creative solutions for them. In personal relationships, win/lose people use up their friends and lose them over time. Lose/win is no better. By becoming a doormat and not standing up for ourselves, we get less than we could, and often build resentment. This is the lazy and cowardly way out. Lose/lose is the worst – neither party gets what they want. Both give up what is important to them to get a little of what they want, but walk away feeling disappointed. Another approach is simply Win, which only cares about winning and ignores the other party completely. Win/win forces conversation about what each party values, and creativity in accomplishing that. Win/Win or no deal is a type of win/win that agrees up front that a deal will only be struck if it works for both sides. (I listened to an audiobook called "The Power of No" in which the author heavily criticized win/win as a goal. He was confused, however, because every example he gave was lose/win, not win/win. His approach was win/lose, and he was very proud of every time he took someone to the cleaners. I suspect he didn't get a lot of repeat business.)

The fifth habit is possibly the most powerful. Seek first to understand, and then to be understood. Typically, we want other people to understand us, but until they feel heard and understood, they probably aren't interested in our perspective. This habit takes a lot of practice, because so often we think we know what someone is going to say, or what they mean, and we want to respond from our own biography. We project ourselves onto their situation and want to provide a solution that would work for us. True empathic listening seeks to really understand what they are thinking, which often is not obvious by what they are saying. Covey suggests repeating back the general ideas we are hearing (not word for word, but paraphrasing) to make sure we are understanding correctly. Often, this leads to clarification until understanding

emerges. Only once we really understand can we offer our input. In other words, diagnose before prescribing. Unfortunately, this habit is rarely exercised, leading to emotional estrangement and relational problems.

The sixth habit is to synergize. Synergy means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. “Synergy is the essence of principle-centered leadership. It is the essence of principle-centered parenting. It catalyzes, unifies and unleashes the greatest power within people. All the habits we have covered prepare us to create the miracle of synergy. To create synergy, we must value the differences between us and others, rather than trying to make them into our mold. Together, we can come up with better solutions than either of us can alone. Dr. Covey calls this “creative cooperation.” Synergizing not only creates much better solutions than negotiating or doing things alone, it also develops relationships.

The seventh habit is different from all the others. It’s take time to sharpen the saw. Dr. Covey gives the example of a man sawing down a tree. He is working very hard, but making little progress. Finally, someone asks him why he doesn’t sharpen his saw so it will cut better. He replies that he would like to, but he is too busy sawing. Focusing only on productivity does not make sense. We need to take the time to work on expanding our productive capacity as well. The most successful people are lifelong learners. Sharpening the saw is a classic Quadrant II activity, and it helps us improve the other six habits. Dr. Covey calls out four areas for renewal – physical, mental, social/emotional and spiritual. It is important not to neglect any of these.

The Seven Habits are not tricks to employ. They are character-building habits that change what we can accomplish by changing who we are. They are not one-time decisions, but deliberate habits that need to be cultivated and improved over time. As we develop these habits in ourselves, our personal effectiveness soars, our relationships deepen, and our influence grows.

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