

Resource 2: Covey – the seven habits

This resource is adapted from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) by Steven Covey.

Covey argues that the seven habits:

'... provide an incremental, sequential, highly integrated approach in the development of personal and interpersonal effectiveness. They move us progressively on a Maturity Continuum from *dependence* to *independence* to *interdependence*.' (pp.48-49)

The movement of the individual from the dependence of childhood to the interdependence of social maturity has powerful echoes for leaders in schools and colleges. Organisational change can only follow personal change and that change is most profound for leaders. Becoming a leader is about creating a paradigm shift in attitudes, behaviour and beliefs and this shift has to be exemplified in personal behaviour; it cannot be brought about by exhortation, nor can it be an 'academic' exercise with purely cosmetic changes.

For Covey, the seven habits which allow this movement from dependence to interdependence are:

1. Be proactive

Covey defines proactivity as much more than being active, busy or even anticipatory. It means that individuals are responsible for their own lives. Behaviour is the result of a conscious choice based on values. It's down to the individual to take control of the 'circle of influence' starting with self, ie, to control that which can be controlled rather than to blame external factors. Change starts with 'I *can* be...' This is a fundamental attitudinal change but it's also about language, expectations and the location of responsibility with self rather than others.

2. Begin with the end in mind

This habit is about values and purpose rather than objective-setting. Covey argues that effective people avoid working 'harder and harder to climb the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall' (p.98). Beginning with the end in mind is being absolutely clear about the primary motivation in life and sticking to it. The 'end' is about a personal mission, a vision driven by clearly understood values. What we centre on to provide this sense of purpose is a matter of individual choice. The crucial thing is to identify the paradigm and then use it as a determinant of decision-making to help us become what we want to be.

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3. Put first things first

If individuals take responsibility for their own life (habit 1) and know who they want to be (habit 2), then it becomes possible to practise habit 3, effective self-management. This means focusing on:

- the non-urgent, important things: planning, relationships, prevention, new opportunities
- learning to say 'no'
- identifying key roles
- setting short-term targets
- planning and organising a timetable
- regular review and adaptation
- genuine delegation

However, this approach has to be conditioned by recognition that 'you think effectiveness with people and efficiency with things ... people are more important than things.' (p.170)

4. Think win/win

This means avoiding creating losers: you, me or us. The alternatives to win/win all involve loss. This is to deny, diminish and minimise another or self. Win/win is a psychological predisposition to find a situation which is mutually beneficial and enhancing and which creates shared benefits. Covey argues that this is not just a technique:

'...it comes from a character of integrity, maturity ... it grows out of high trust relationships.' (p.233)

Habits 1 to 3 are essential precursors to allowing the following process:

- genuine empathy – really understanding the other point of view
- identifying and agreeing the issues and concerns
- agreeing that what results constitutes a mutually acceptable solution
- agreeing action to achieve results.

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5. Understand and then be understood

In other words: genuine empathic listening, leaving our own psychological 'baggage' behind and working very hard to see the situation from the other person's point of view. 'It is listening to understand – emotionally and intellectually, feelings as well as meaning' (p.241). This type of listening involves a denial of what Covey calls 'autobiographical listening', ie, imposing ourselves on the other person. Avoiding this involves:

- reflecting back content
- rephrasing content
- reflecting feeling
- rephrasing content and reflecting feeling.

Empathic understanding recognises that there is no objectivity in relationships – understanding is recognising alternative perceptions.

Being understood, Covey argues (p.255), involves a three-stage process:

1. demonstrating credibility, integrity and competence
2. showing understanding of the other point of view
3. arguing the case – demonstrating the logic of the presentation.

The upshot of this process: the facts don't speak for themselves - relationships must come first.

6. Synergise

'Synergy is the essence of principle-centred leadership ... It catalyses, unifies and unleashes the greatest powers within people ... It means that the relationship which the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself.' (pp. 262-263)

Synergy is about the critical mass, the higher way, the creative coalition which produces the joint solution. Synergising is about recognising and respecting different points of view, and using them as driving forces to produce the best solution and enhance mutual awareness and respect. Principle-centred leadership is about recognising the potential to add value in every situation, both in terms of the quality of the outcome or solution and the relationship. It's rather like joining two pieces of wood with a finely crafted joint: the combined pieces are far stronger, but the joint is even more resilient.

7. Sharpen the saw

This habit is one that makes the others possible. It's about renewal, growth and learning. Covey identified four 'dimensions' for renewal:

physical
social
spiritual
mental