A Summary of Covey’s Seven Habits
Version of 6 June 2022

Stephen Covey’s book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, provides a set of tools for improving one’s effectiveness. This synopsis briefly reviews the habits, one by one. Covey’s prose style is somewhat labored and obscure, and even a brief synopsis of his ideas will make the book easier to use. Certainly, these short comments will not provide the depth of information and insight that you can get from the book — they are intended to interest you in reading the book and to help you get the most from the book.

The seven habits Covey discusses are:

The first habit is on-going self-renewal — physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual. This habit is the starting point and the foundation of self-development.

1. Sharpen the saw

Private victories - These habits you must master first, by yourself.

2. Be proactive
3. Begin with the end in mind
4. First things first

These first three habits move you from dependence to independence.

Public victories - These habits define how you relate to others.

5. Think win/win
6. Seek first to understand, then to be understood
7. Synergize

These second three habits move you from independence to interdependence.

Developing new skills and habits takes time and practice — there is no “quick fix.” Covey refers to this investment of time and effort as the “law of the harvest.” He says that focusing on mere technique — quick fixes without fundamental changes — is “like cramming your way through school. You sometimes get by, perhaps even get good grades, but 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. Did you ever consider how ridiculous it would be to try to cram on a farm — to forget to plant in the spring, play all summer, and then cram in the fall to bring in the harvest? The farm is a natural system. The price must be paid and the process followed. You always reap what you sow; there is no shortcut.”

Change — in oneself, in others, in organizations — occurs at the rate of growth, not at the rate of insight. You may see in an instant how you must change in some way, but to make the change requires attention and effort over a period of time. The first sign of progress is that you remember after you’ve done something the old way, that you wanted to change that. Then you remember as you’re doing it the old way. And finally, you start to remember before you do it, and then the change starts to take effect. It’s a matter of extinguishing an old habit and starting a new habit, and habits are difficult to change — which is exactly the power of good habits.
When you start to apply the method, I suggest you make your weekly plan using a single-page template — like the PDF at bit.ly/3E3vKvp — for at least six weeks to gain experience. (The post at that link has additional content that makes it worth reading.) You can continue to use weekly planning sheets after the trial period described in that post, or you can use a book format — a plain journal, a weekly planner (facing pages cover one week — The Simple Elephant is good), or software like WeekPlan.net.

Habit 0: “Sharpen the Saw” — On-going self-renewal

Habit 0 is the first habit discussed in Covey’s book because it refers to what you’re doing in reading the book and learning Covey’s method. Covey refers to the habit as Habit 7, and he does not explain why it comes before Habit 1. (Normally, 7 follows 1, but 0 precedes it — thus, I changed the name to Habit 0: it is where you begin.)

Covey quite early in the book talks about the importance of maintaining a balance between Production (the creation of useful works) and Productive Capability (the capacity to create). He calls this the P/PC balance.

If a machine is run continuously, with no time out for maintenance, it breaks down — too much focus on P, not enough on PC. If someone saws wood at a furious rate but never takes time to sharpen the saw, their production will suffer—too much focus on P, not enough on PC. On the other hand, if one focuses totally on study, understanding, and learning, without ever taking action, there’s too much focus on PC, not enough on P.

Taking time to read a book like Covey’s and work on your skills is clearly time devoted to improving your PC. Covey mentions four areas for “sharpening the saw”:

Physical - issues relating to yourself as a physical body: nutrition, exercise, rest, recreation, stress management, meditation, etc. Failure to care for yourself physically leads to illness, burnout, low energy levels, etc.

Mental - issues relating to knowledge, skills, and mastery of the tools of the trade. Failure to take time for this area leads to your becoming out-of-date, unable to cope with new tools and methods, and increasingly reliant on others.

Social/emotional - issues relating to your relationships with others: your family, your spouse, your friends, your community. Failure to devote appropriate time, energy, and thought to this area leads to isolation and loneliness, breakdowns of relationships, and personal crises.

Spiritual - issues relating to developing and clarifying your values, principles, and life goals and keeping them in mind through meditation, study, etc. Failure to devote time and thought to this area leads to feelings of pointlessness and ennui: “What’s it all about? What’s the point? Why am I doing this?”

If you believe that it is indeed important to develop a habit of continued learning, development, and renewal, undertaking the acquisition of Covey’s seven habits is a good project — at the very least it provides a structure and process you can explore and try.
Habit 1: Be Proactive — A Paradigm Shift

Covey believes that seeing things in a new way is the only effective way to change behavior. His book provides a wonderful example of how the same identical thing can be seen in two different ways, and although two people are seeing the same physical object, they cannot agree on what they are seeing because of how they view it. In your own life, you have probably encountered situations you interpreted one way but, with more information, you interpreted the same events and words in quite a different way. Although the situation itself was unchanged, your view of it changed—and with the new perception, you experience a different attitude and different behavior.

A paradigm shift occurs when you experience such a change of view not about a single situation but about your understanding of the world and how it works. Covey believes that major and permanent changes in attitude and behavior can occur only if you make a paradigm shift. If no such shift happens, your attitudes and behaviors—which, after all, are driven by your view of the world—will drift back to what they originally were.

The following passage is from Daniel Quinn’s novel My Ishmael:

Ishmael studied me for a moment and said, “...Even at your age, you’ve probably already met a certain kind of person who is convinced that anything bad that happens in his life is someone else’s fault—never his own. If you haven’t met such a person, I can guarantee that you will do so someday. Such a person never learns from his mistakes, because as far as he's concerned, he makes no mistakes. He never discovers the sources of his difficulties, because he believes those sources lie in others who are beyond his control. To put it very simply, everything that goes wrong in his life he blames on others. He never says to himself, ‘The problem is something I’m doing.’ He says, ‘The problem is something other people are doing. Other people are to blame for all my troubles—and I can’t change them, so I’m helpless.'”

The person whose worldview has him see all his problems as caused by other people will behave accordingly, blaming other people and taking no action to improve things. To change things, the person must achieve a paradigm shift that will enable him to see those problems that are in his control, which in turn enables him to take action on those things to improve his lot.

Covey discusses the paradigm shift in some detail because Habit 1 — Be Proactive—requires a paradigm shift. To be proactive requires first that you believe that you have a choice about your response to the world and about your experiences in the world, and then to act on that belief by making conscious choices. Your responses (in this worldview) are not determined by your genes, your upbringing, or your society or culture. If you can accept responsibility for your responses, you can undertake to choose to respond in ways that are most consistent with your principles and values—and, in fact, you can choose to initiate actions, rather than simply to react to what happens. For
example, if you are proactive, you can choose to make Habit 0 — Sharpen the Saw — a part of your life by planning and scheduling appropriate activities each week.

Certainly, you can believe that you don’t have a choice in your responses. That, however, leads to the situation as discussed in the passage above. And note that the person described in the passage will probably resist a paradigm shift because he will feel that, if he does admit that he can choose his response and that he’s been making the wrong choices, he’s wasted all those days, weeks, or years in bemoaning his lot instead of acting to improve things. Yet he can’t advance until the paradigm shift does occur — he can’t make new choices until he acknowledges that his previous responses were choices.

The person described in the passage above is an extreme case. Most of us see at least some of our mistakes and believe that our situation results in part from the choices that we’ve made. But most people, in Covey’s view, stop short of seeing the degree to which they can choose. For example, people want to feel empowered, but many believe — or at least act as if — empowerment is something that will come to them from someone else, not something that they themselves can choose and initiate. They wait for someone to empower them — choosing a course that is the very opposite of empowerment.

Whatever a person’s worldview, they will seek (and find) evidence to support that worldview. By viewing experiences through their worldview, they interpret those experiences in ways that support their worldview. A paradigm shift enables them to view and interpret those same experiences in a new and different way.

Covey mentions Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (bit.ly/2n76rkz), in which Frankl, a Jew imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, found that he could choose his response to his situation. This freedom could not be taken from him, though his liberty could. Between stimulus and response, Frankl found a gap that allowed him to exercise his self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and independent will in choosing his response. This gap allows us to be proactive, to decide how we will live.

**Reactive model:** No choice

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Stimulus ➔ Response
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**Proactive model:** Freedom to choose

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Stimulus ➔ Freedom to choose
The gap

Self-Awareness
Imagination
Independent will
Conscience
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Response
If we are proactive, our behavior is based on our decisions; it’s not determined by our conditions. We can subordinate our feelings to our values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen by our choice. Reactive people build their lives based on the reactions of others, thus allowing others to control them.

Notice that choosing one’s response requires one first to view such a choice as possible (that’s the paradigm shift) and then to make the choice. Certainly, you know people who are reactive, who view their responses as beyond their control. These people (like the person in the passage above) view their responses as controlled by others, and they use language that expresses that view:

“See what you made me do.”
“He makes me so mad.”
“I can’t do that. I just don’t have the time.”
“If only my spouse were more patient.”
“If only my company (or my boss) would empower me.”
“If only someone would... (teach me computer skills, teach me...)
“I have to do it” or “I have no choice.”
“That’s just the way I am.”

So Covey sees two models:

- **The Reactive Model** is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and reactive people become victims in their own eyes. Moreover, because they perceive themselves as victims, they behave as victims. Perception shapes behavior.

- **The Proactive Model** enables people to be effective. Choosing to view yourself as making choices is the first step to becoming effective. A person becomes empowered by adopting the proactive model — empowerment comes from within. As Covey says, “The gate of change opens only from the inside.” No one else can empower you. You must empower yourself.

Finally, Covey talks about looking at where you focus your attention and energy.

Your **circle of concern** consists of those situations and events over which you have no control. If you focus your attention and energy on things in the circle of concern, you gradually adopt the reactive model (because you have no control over these things).

Your **circle of influence** consists of those situations and events which you do control or influence. [Important note: Your own choices and your responses to situations are squarely in the center of your circle of influence.] By focusing your attention and energy on things in the circle of influence, you can take action and see the results.

You can solve direct control problems by working on your habits, solve indirect control problems by changing your methods of influence, and simply accept those things over which you have no control.

Covey suggests that, for 30 days, you focus your attention and energy on your circle of influence, make small commitments and keep them, and be a model, not a critic. For a
full day, listen to yourself and others to hear whether the language used is reactive or proactive. And select a problem that is frustrating you and see whether it is in your circle of influence or your circle of concern.

**Habit 2: Begin With The End In Mind**

You have read about the importance of maintaining a balance between Production and Production Capability. Habit 0 addresses this: you “sharpen the saw” (renew yourself) by spending time on your physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual development and growth. You also read how a particular worldview — viewing your actions as a matter of your choice, based on your self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and independent will — supports Habit 1: to be proactive rather than reactive.

Once you view yourself as capable of choosing your actions and responses, you move naturally to Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind — choosing your goals at the outset, before you begin to act.

Each thing that we create goes through two creations: the first, mental — the desired goal, the blueprint, the flight plan, the design — and the second, physical — the actual outcome, the house, the flight, the final product.

The first creation — establishing the end we have in mind — precedes the second, and the first creation also directs the second. This seems obvious, and yet many people get caught up in the busyness of daily activities and, as Thomas Merton wrote, “climb the ladder of success only to find that it’s leaning on the wrong wall.” By failing to think about their life goals, they busily work themselves in a direction and to a destination that they would not have chosen had they thought deeply about their goals at the start.

The most important of the “first creations” concerns your own life. If you don’t develop self-awareness and become responsible for your own first creation of your life — that is, to think about your life goals and define your own mission — you empower other people, random events, and mere circumstances to shape your life by default. With Habit 1 you make yourself responsible for your choices, and with Habit 2 you make the first creation of your life: you choose the principles and values by which you will act and you set the goals toward which you will work.

In a business context, leadership is the first creation — creating the vision and setting the direction. Management is the second creation (Habit 3, discussed in the next section) — doing the work and taking the actions to realize the vision. Leadership: where are we heading? Management: what’s the best way to get there? Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things.

Habit 1 means that you can write the script for your life. Habit 2 has you write that script — your life goals and life roles.

Covey refers to this script as a “mission statement” and recommends that you write a mission statement for yourself as you think about your own life. (See bit.ly/3nPJmnH and also bit.ly/3kgmInE for helpful ideas and suggestions.) Covey also suggests that a
family write a mission statement so that all will have a common understanding of their mutual goals. Companies and departments often have mission statements. All of these statements are efforts to define a first creation, a deliberate choice of vision and direction. The preamble to the U.S. Constitution is the mission statement for the U.S. government.

There are various ways to develop a mission statement. One way is to imagine your own funeral, in the distant future. What would you want the following to say about you?

- Your family
- Your friends
- Your co-workers
- Your church or community members

Another approach is to list the five to seven primary roles you now have — parent, spouse, employee, manager, family member, and church member, for example. You can then think about your goals and mission for each role you fill.

A mission statement is not something done quickly or something done once. It takes time, thought, and revisiting. Certainly, it is a useful exercise in any event to think about what you want out of your life. It’s your choice (once you accept Habit 1).

These brief comments leave out much that is in Covey’s book. If you find this information useful, I strongly recommend that you read The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. See bit.ly/2nDeklw for inexpensive secondhand copies.

**Habit 3: First Things First**

Before going further, write down the answers to these two questions:

1. What one thing could you do (that you’re not doing now) that, if you did it regularly, would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?
2. What one thing could you do in your work life that would make a similar difference?

Habit 3 is the practical fulfillment of Habits 1 and 2. With Habit 1, you accept responsibility for your own life. With Habit 2 you develop the first creation, in your imagination, of your life goals. With Habit 3 you achieve the second creation, in reality.

Habit 3 requires independent will: the power to do something even when you may not feel like doing it or want to do it — to be driven by your values rather than by your impulse or desire of the moment.

The key to Habit 3 is to organize and execute your schedule based on your priorities. Rather than prioritizing your schedule, you schedule your priorities — and you schedule them first, before scheduling anything else.

In the following chart, “important” means that the activity contributes to your mission, your values, or your high-priority goals.
If you spend the majority of time in Quadrant I, the results are stress, burnout, crisis management, perennially putting out fires.

If you spend the majority of time in Quadrant III, the results are short-term focus, crisis management, never being able to make or use goals and plans, feeling victimized and out of control, shallow or broken relationships, always busy but no satisfying accomplishments.

If you spend the majority of time in Quadrant IV, the results are total irresponsibility, fired from jobs, dependent on others or institutions for basics.

Effective people stay out Quadrants III and IV because, urgent or not, they're not important. And they shrink Quadrant I by spending all the time they can in Quadrant II. At the start, take the time formerly spent in Quadrant III and spend it in Quadrant II instead. It's easy to say "no" if you have a clear idea of your true priorities.

If you spend most of your time in Quadrant II, you gain vision, perspective, balance, discipline, control, well-thought-out goals and plans, and Quadrant II crises shrink.

Take a look at your answers to the two questions at the beginning. To what quadrant do they belong? Are they important? Are they urgent? They probably belong in Quadrant II: deeply important, but not urgent. And because they aren’t urgent, you don’t do them.

To become a Quadrant II self-manager, refer to your mission statement and your roles and goals. Each week work out a schedule, scheduling your priorities first.

1. Identify your roles (example: spouse, supervisor, employee, father, Little League coach, family member, student).
2. Identify 1 or 2 important results you should accomplish in each role during the coming week — important, not necessarily urgent.
3. Schedule the time to do the activities to produce those results.

4. Do the activities as scheduled; adapt daily to disruptions.

By building the schedule with your priorities first, each week you will progress toward the long-term goals you have in mind. The important work won’t get pushed aside by short-term, urgent but unimportant tasks.

You will quickly learn to schedule your priorities early in the week — that way, if some Quadrant I situation does arise that makes it impossible to keep an appointment to work on a priority, you can reschedule the appointment for later in the week.

If you are a manager, Covey discusses a particularly effective way of delegating tasks. Effective delegation is a powerful high-leverage activity, but it requires thought and preparation. Covey calls his method “stewardship delegation.”

Stewardship delegation focuses on results, not methods, and it requires clear, up-front mutual understanding and commitment in five areas:

1. **The desired results** (*not* methods): what is to be done and when (but not how)
2. **Guidelines** that specify the parameters (principles, policies, etc.) with which results are to be accomplished
3. **Resources**: the human, financial, technical, or organizational support available to help accomplish the results
4. **Accountability**: the standards of performance and the time(s) of evaluation
5. **Consequences** — good and bad, natural and logical: what does and will happen as a result of the evaluation

*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* includes a good detailed example of this type of delegation.

Read the book’s Appendix B: “A Quadrant II Day at the Office.” You can download two versions of a useful one-page template for a week’s plan at bit.ly/3E3vKvp Use it for at least six weeks following the suggestions at that link.

Here are some other tips that might be useful.

» When you’re given an assignment, **start early** — allow time for ideas to accumulate. In particular, make sure you can sleep on it: the next morning, you will have more ideas and a better perspective. Even if the assignment is to write a report due in a month, take time immediately to spend three minutes jotting down the ideas that occur to you. The sooner you break the ice on the assignment, the more time you have to iterate improvement. (See “Best One-Word Advice I’ve Found” bit.ly/3vyzPVC.)

» Do little things — that require only a few minutes — immediately. This is much faster than putting them aside and trying to remember to get back to them later. Of course, you should determine whether they must be done at all.
Become skilled at completing administrivia (timesheets, expense reports, etc.) early in the most efficient way possible. Don’t let it become grit in the gears of your life.

Work once, use twice: make products of your work serve multiple purposes: as a template for later similar assignments, or re-purposed for other uses (e.g., an answer to a sales rep’s question becomes a handout for all sales reps becomes a newsletter article for customers).

Build lists in digital format so you can easily use them again and again: budgets, T&E reports, list of products, list of materials, revenue by state by year, etc.

Look for systemic solutions. When solving a problem, look for its root causes so you can solve it once and for all. This is a Quadrant II response to a Quadrant I crisis.

If you find yourself in Quadrant I with a repeating activity that comes around every week or month or year, immediately mark your calendar to start it much earlier next time.

Habits 1, 2, and 3 lead to what Covey calls a “private victory,” which takes you from dependence to independence. All three habits are things that you can start immediately, by yourself. The self-mastery and self-discipline that you gain from these habits are the foundations of good relationships with others. The next three habits — 4, 5, and 6 — lead to interdependence — the ability to work as a member of an effective team or family and achieve together things beyond the reach of any individual. Independence is an achievement; interdependence is a choice that only independent people can make. So the first priority is to achieve the private victory of the first three habits before starting on habits 4, 5, and 6.

**Habit 4: Think Win/Win**

Habit 4 is the first of three habits that lead from independence to interdependence. In Covey’s view, interdependence — working effectively as a member of a team of independent individuals — is a step beyond independence. One independent person can accomplish only so much and have only so many ideas, but a team of interdependent people — independent people who have mastered the habits of interdependence for effective interaction — can accomplish much more even if the team consists of only two persons, as in a marriage. And Covey further believes that, until you have mastered the three habits that lead to independence, you cannot be effectively interdependent.

“Private Victory precedes Public Victory.” As he points out, self-mastery and self-discipline are the foundation on which one builds good relationships with others.

In building relationships with others, Covey uses the image of an “emotional bank account,” in which deposits are made through courtesy, kindness, honesty, keeping commitments, and the like. As the number of such deposits increases, so does trust. Withdrawals come through broken commitments, disrespect, discourtesy, overreacting, and so on. As the emotional bank account becomes low and even overdrawn, the relationship becomes tense and strained, and any prospect of working successfully together diminishes. You might wish he had used another metaphor (I do), but the idea
is clear: some actions strengthen your relationship with another person, other actions weaken it. Regardless of the metaphor, your actions do affect your relationships.

Covey lists the six major deposits that you can make to the emotional bank account as:

1. **Understanding the individual** - Really seeking to understand other people, rather than explaining yourself (or themselves) to them. Interrupting to disagree or (worse) to change the topic is a significant withdrawal.

2. **Attending to little things** - The kindnesses and courtesies of everyday life: listening without interrupting, acknowledging help through thanks, making sure people are informed and consulted in a timely manner, and so on. In contrast, an emotional outburst of anger or frustration constitutes a major withdrawal, particularly when it occurs in the leader of a group or team.

3. **Keeping commitments** - Keeping a commitment or promise is a major deposit; breaking one is a major withdrawal. A broken promise on something important to someone can be the biggest withdrawal you can make. It’s hard to win back trust that’s lost, and it may be impossible. It takes self-mastery and self-discipline to make commitments only when you can meet them, and to avoid making casual commitments and promises just to please someone or because it sounds good at the time, with no real expectation that you will in fact honor the commitment or promise. (That, too, can become a habit — a bad one.)

4. **Clarifying expectations** - If you communicate your expectations to another person and also make sure you understand his or her expectations, making the expectations explicit and making sure you both understand them, then you are smoothing the way for effective interactions. The deposit is to make expectations clear and explicit at the very beginning, which saves great amounts of time and effort and possible disagreement later on. A good way to ensure communication of expectations is to use “mirror” comments: restating the other person’s expectations to clarify the understanding you have of them, and having the other person restate your expectations so you can verify that they have the same understanding of them as you.

5. **Showing personal integrity** - Personal integrity generates trust and is the basis for many different kinds of deposits. Integrity includes — but goes beyond — honesty. Honesty is telling the truth — making sure our words correspond to reality. Integrity involves keeping promises and fulfilling expectations — making sure reality corresponds to our words. One of the most important aspects of integrity is to be loyal to those who are not present. By doing so, you build the trust of those who are present.

6. **Apologizing sincerely when you make a withdrawal** - It takes (and shows) a great deal of character strength to acknowledge one’s error and apologize quickly from the heart. Great deposits come with the sincere words, “I was wrong;” “That was unkind of me;” “I showed you no respect, and I’m deeply
An “apology” that minimizes the error, denies responsibility, and fails to express any regret amounts to an additional withdrawal, possibly larger than that caused by the original error. A true apology does not contain the words “but” or “if,” and a true apology is felt by the person making it.

With this idea of an emotional bank account with others, let’s start looking at the habits of Public Victory — that is, the effective habits of effectiveness and success in working with other people.

Like Habit 1, Habit 4 requires a paradigm shift — it requires that you think “win/win” in your interactions with others. This means you view those interactions with a new goal: making sure that both parties win. Seeing things in a new way results in changes in attitude and behavior.

Covey lists these paradigms of human interaction:

- **Win/Lose**: I don’t feel that I have a true win unless you also lose. This is the point of view of those who view a negotiation as settling on a fixed outcome with the more that you get, the less there is for me. It’s the viewpoint of competition.
- **Lose/Win**: A paradigm used by those who are willing to sacrifice anything to avoid confrontation or disagreement. It’s the viewpoint of appeasement.
- **Lose/Lose**: The result when two Win/Lose people get together: neither will let the other win, so both lose. It’s the viewpoint that leads to tragedy.
- **Win**: This is a person who doesn’t care whether you win or lose so long as they win. They look out only for themselves. It’s the viewpoint of narcissism.
- **Win/Win or No Deal**: This is the recommended paradigm: both must win, or there will be no deal. This is a tough negotiating stance because it requires firmness and creativity to find a way for both to win — but otherwise, there’s no deal. It’s the viewpoint of co-operation.

Win/Win or No Deal is most realistic at the beginning of a business relationship or enterprise. In a continuing business relationship, No Deal may not be a viable option. Also, as Roger Fisher and William Ury point out in their excellent (and highly recommended) book on negotiation (Getting to Yes; inexpensive secondhand copies at bit.ly/2nOgWoR), the outcome of any particular negotiation may be of less importance than the overall relationship. This does not mean that you negotiate from a Win/Lose standpoint, but rather that you and your negotiating partner exercise creativity to find or create a Win/Win. The book, a product of the Harvard Negotiation Project, provides excellent examples using a four-step process to achieve a Win/Win agreement.

In a Win/Win agreement, five elements are made explicit:

1. **The desired results (not methods)**: what is to be done and when (but not how)
2. **Guidelines** that specify the parameters (principles, policies, etc.) with which results are to be accomplished
3. Resources: the human, financial, technical, or organizational support available to help accomplish the results

4. Accountability: the standards of performance and the time(s) of evaluation

5. Consequences — good and bad, natural and logical: what does and will happen as a result of the evaluation

These are the same as the five essential parts of effective (“stewardship”) delegation; in a Win/Win agreement, both sides act as stewards to make the agreement work.

With Habit 4, “Think Win/Win,” you move toward Public Victory and interdependence.

**Habit 5: Seek First To Understand, Then To Be Understood**

This habit also can require a paradigm shift. Although we are taught to read, to write, and even to speak, most of us have had no formal training in listening — our listening skills are self-taught. And people whose skills are self-taught — whether swimming, golf, decision-making, or listening — almost always fall victim to certain typical errors. (The common errors in decision-making (and how to avoid them) are described in *Decision Traps*, a book well worth careful study: see [bit.ly/2nkuezf](http://bit.ly/2nkuezf) for inexpensive copies.)

Most self-taught listeners listen “autobiographically,” as Covey terms it: they filter what they hear through their own life and experience, and fit what they hear into their own preconceptions, worldview, and judgments. They listen selectively, hearing those statements with which they agree, and not really taking in statements that don’t match their views or what they expect you to say.

As a result, their responses come out of their own prior view, so the other person feels that they have not been heard or understood — because they haven’t been. It’s as if you visit an optometrist, and before your eyes are examined, the optometrist hands you his or her glasses and says, “Here, this is what you need. I’ve used these for years, and they work perfectly. I have an extra pair, so you can keep these.” Most of us would prefer that the prescription come AFTER diagnosis — that the solution be delivered AFTER the problem is understood.

Empathic listening, in which you open yourself to get inside the other person’s frame of reference — to look out through that frame of reference to see the world the way they see the world and understand their paradigm and how they feel — delivers much more than better information. It provides psychological “air” to the other person — it lets them feel that they have been understood, affirmed, validated, and appreciated. Until that need is satisfied, they will find it difficult to work on a solution or try to understand your view.

It’s a paradox, in a way: to influence someone, you must become open to being influenced by them. If your “listening” is just a matter of waiting for them to stop speaking, you yourself will not be heard. Model the listening you hope for from them.

It’s important to understand that if you listen in this way, you might find your own views changing. Not to put too fine a point on it, you might learn something. Indeed, it’s a
good practice to listen with an attitude of wanting to learn something. And quite often, if you are paying attention, you will indeed learn things. Listen to take things in, not to simply wait until you have a chance to speak.

If we are listening autobiographically (and thus ineffectively), we respond in four ways:

- **We evaluate** — we agree or disagree.
- **We probe** — we ask questions from our own frame of experience.
- **We advise** — we give counsel based on our own experience.
- **We interpret** — we try to figure people out, explain their motives and behavior based on our own motives and behavior.

Any of these will shut down true communication from the other person and thus deprive you of the chance to truly understand what they are communicating (and also of the chance to learn something new).

If we listen autobiographically, we in some way or another structure our response so that we are talking about ourselves. ( Narcissists are incapable of listening other than autobiographically.) In the chapter on Habit 5 in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey gives a wonderful and detailed example of a father listening autobiographically to his son, and the son’s internal feelings about the experience. It’s well worth reading.

Empathic listening requires that you go beyond merely listening to the words being spoken. An empathic listener, out of a sincere desire to understand, also pays attention to tone, to pauses, to changes in topic, to juxtapositions of topics (and the connections thus implied), to body language, to things downplayed (not mentioned (avoided) or minimized (diminished or mentioned only in passing) and what that might mean.

The empathic listener is open and listens with heart as well as mind. Such listening takes time — but not so much time as it takes to back up and correct misunderstandings later, or to deal with the problems that result from misunderstandings, or to live with tension from unexpressed and unresolved problems. And the empathic listener listens with conscious alertness, not from within a trance — see bit.ly/3Nx1dgh.

As you listen deeply to other people, you will discover how very much their perceptions differ from yours, and you will appreciate the impact such differences have as people try to work together. And all those different perceptions can be right within the worldviews of the different people. We all tend strongly to believe/assume that our own particular perceptions are “right.” Listening empathically provides an opportunity to test that belief and assumption. You can’t push or probe; you must be patient and respectful, and put aside your own autobiography. But listening to understand pays big dividends, so learning how to do it is worth the effort and practice.

But, as with Win/Win, two aspects must be satisfied. In Win/Win, you can’t have only one party win — both must win (or no deal). And with Habit 5 — Seek first to understand, then to be understood — it is also important that you be understood.
The fact that you understand the other person helps enormously in getting the other person to understand you. First, the fact that you have listened — truly listened to understand — makes them ready to listen to you. And, because you now understand their views, perceptions, problems, and needs related to the issue, you can better communicate your own thoughts — you know where they are coming from, and you know how to express yourself so that they will understand.

Note that habit 5 is right in the middle of your Circle of Influence: you can always seek first to understand. That’s something that’s totally within your control. And as you practice this habit, you will find that people open up to you more, that your understanding increases, and that people listen to you more. Plus you generally learn quite a bit.

As with the law of the harvest, listening to understand is not something that can be done quickly. It takes time, both to master the skill and to actually do empathic listening and it takes more time to make that a habit.

The book Mindset [bit.ly/2o7u1iJ](bit.ly/2o7u1iJ)provides good (and encouraging) information on learning new skills, and it’s well worth reading. See also “Learning a New Skill Is a Struggle — Find Pleasure in It” [bit.ly/3pneCNa](bit.ly/3pneCNa)

**Habit 6: Synergize**

“Synergy” is the term applied to situations in which the individual components in combination have much more value (or productivity, or strength, or whatever) than the sum of their individual values taken separately. In the seven habits, the synergy is in human interaction and it is based on (and derived from) the habits already discussed — but synergy requires one more thing: that you develop the habit of looking for the value of the differences among your team (and not see only the drawbacks).

If your team consists of people who are independent (have mastered Habits 1, 2, and 3) and thus who can trust one another, who think win/win (Habit 4) and seek first to understand and then to be understood (Habit 5), then the team can build creatively on their different perceptions and strengths, thus becoming much stronger than a team in which all members think alike. But of course, having members who think differently means that some may initially view what others say as “wrong.” To get past the judgments and combine the differences into creative and integrated solutions is the secret of synergy.

Thus, finding value in the differences in people — the mental, emotional, and psychological differences — is the essence of organizational synergy. All people see the world not as it is but as they are, and the strength of diversity is that it provides many views of reality. Those lacking the confidence to incorporate others’ views into their own picture of situation and solution cannot build a strong team because their energy is spent trying to determine which view is “right” and which is “wrong.” (Habit 5 combats this tendency.) A synergistic team can be open in its communication (because people don’t fear being labeled as “wrong”) and can find third alternatives without getting
trapped in an either/or mentality. A good book to read in this connection is Edward de Bono’s *Po: Beyond Yes and No* ([bit.ly/2my0tNU](bit.ly/2my0tNU)).

Even diversifying just on gender has a big and positive impact on the workplace if the synergy is realized. Good diversity means having approximately equal gender balance in managers, in employees, and in teams. From the *Vanity Fair* article “How to Break Up the Silicon Valley Boys’ Club” by Susan Wojcicki ([bit.ly/2ntOcdE](bit.ly/2ntOcdE)):

> There is a solution that has been proven to address gender discrimination in all its forms, both implicit and explicit: hiring more women. Employing more women at all levels of a company, from new hires to senior leaders, creates a virtuous cycle. Companies become more attuned to the needs of their female employees, improving workplace culture while lowering attrition. They escape a cycle of men mostly hiring men. *And study after study has shown that greater diversity leads to better outcomes, more innovative solutions, less groupthink, better stock performance and G.D.P. growth.*

Covey suggests an interesting idea, **force field analysis**, developed by sociologist Kurt Lewin, who described any situation — such as the current level of performance — as a state of equilibrium between driving forces that encourage improvement and restraining forces that discourage it.

Driving forces generally are positive, reasonable, logical, conscious, and economic. Restraining forces often are negative, emotional, illogical, unconscious, and social/psychological. Usually we are aware of driving forces — being positive, they are out in the open — while restraining forces are not recognized or at least not discussed. Typically, some restraining forces are “undiscussable” (taboo) in a particular corporate culture: you can’t talk about them, nor can you talk about the fact that you can’t talk about them. Chris Argyris discusses this in his books: see, for example, *Increasing Leadership Effectiveness* ([bit.ly/2mWCpQf](bit.ly/2mWCpQf)).

Both sets of forces are very real and must be taken into account in dealing with change. To improve a situation, most people focus on the driving forces — the forces that move toward improvement. But if the restraining forces are left unchecked, the situation, after being improved for a while, will gradually revert to its previous level. It is important to look not only at strengthening the driving forces but also at finding and removing or weakening the restraining forces.

The *Atlantic* article “Why Is Silicon Valley So Awful to Women?” by Liza Munday ([theatlntc/c/2lWVITg](theatlntc/c/2lWVITg)) describes examples of both restraining forces and driving forces regarding gender diversity, as does Wojcicki’s article quoted above.

Although Covey does not specifically mention it, adopting and applying his seven habits requires what now is called “a willingness to take risks” and once was called “courage.” It takes courage to view the world in a new way after a paradigm shift — to leave behind the view that always seemed “right.” And it takes courage to discuss restraining forces that the current corporate culture doesn’t want to recognize or even to mention.
Addendum

A post at bit.ly/3Bc9duE is worth reading to augment this outline. The post contains more information and some useful insights, including the following.

A recent article in the Nonzero Newsletter has two valuable ideas. One is the attribution fallacy: that we tend to attribute to character or personality things that may well be better attributed to situation and circumstance — and we do that to avoid revising our opinion of a person’s character or personality. If someone we like or see as an ally does something bad, we attribute that to circumstances rather than as a sign of their character; and if someone we see as unfriendly or an enemy does something good, again we attribute that to circumstances rather than as a sign that our judgment of their character might be incomplete or even wrong. (These are examples of resisting a paradigm shift in our view of the person. It’s easier just to stay with the opinion we already formed than to reconsider that opinion in the light of new information.)

The article also discusses the useful tool of “cognitive empathy.” Unlike emotional empathy, in which you put yourself in another’s place to understand their feelings, with cognitive empathy you put yourself in another’s place to see how they think about and understand some issue or event, the look at it from their point of view. Read the article. It fits with some of what Covey describes — for example, Habit 5: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

The post linked above also includes downloadable PDFs of two weekly planning worksheets to help you implement the ideas in Covey’s book and make using them a part of your daily life. You can try both formats to see which you prefer. Here’s one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK OF</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Roles &amp; Goals</td>
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<td>2. Sharpen the Saw</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/Emotional</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Each Day’s Priority Actions (From Sharpen the Saw and Steps toward Goals for My Various Roles)</td>
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<td>4. Appointments/Commitments — First Schedule Priority Actions Listed Above, Then Add Other Appointments</td>
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See https://leisuregu.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/reprise-of-coveys-7-habits/
Each of the weekly planning worksheets has a column at the left whose focus is specifically Quadrant II — things that are important but not urgent. In that column, you list for the coming week actions to Sharpen the Saw and also your current goals for each of your various roles. Both worksheets are completed following a clockwise sequence:

1 – Sharpening the Saw
2 – Roles/Goals
3 – Today’s Priority Actions
4 – Appointments/Commitments

1. **Sharpening the Saw**

First, in each category list actions for the coming week — actions that will improve a) your fitness and physical well-being, b) your knowledge and skills, c) your social relationships, and d) your spiritual strength and purpose. Don’t overdo it. You’re in this for the long haul, and the benefits will accumulate over time if you work steadily at it. One or at most two actions in each category is enough (though an action might involve repetition — for example, under Physical, you might enter “run 4 mornings for a total of 35 Cooper points.”

2. **Roles/Goals**

List your various roles — spouse, parent, manager, employee, volunteer, and so on. Then, for each role, list a particular goal that will be your focus during the coming week.

3. **Today’s Priority Actions**

At this point, you have a list of actions under Sharpen the Saw, and a list of goals under Roles/Goals. This step is where you decide on which days you’ll take various actions. First, take actions listed under “Sharpen the Saw” and decide on which day(s) you will take each action. Enter the actionals in “Today’s Priority Actions” for the appropriate day(s).

Then consider each of the entries under Roles/Goals and decide on one or two actions you will take toward achieving each goal. List each such action under a particular day in the “Today’s Priority Actions” section.

It’s important not to overload any one day. If you assign too many actions to any one day, you will find you cannot complete them all, and that’s disheartening. For any week, one or perhaps two actions per role and one action for each category of Sharpening the Saw is probably enough to keep you advancing toward your goals. Slow and steady wins the race.

It may take some time to work out how to organize and distribute the various actions in this section so that no day is too heavily loaded. **Important point:** Favor assigning actions to days early in the week. By doing that, when something comes up that prevents you from accomplishing an action on its assigned day, you can reschedule it for later in the week and still get it done within the week. Tom Gilb, in *Software Engineering*
Management, offered the one-word (and excellent) advice: “Early!” (See “Best One-Word Rule I’ve Found.”)

It’s worth noting that every action in this section will be a Quadrant II action: both important and non-urgent.

4. **Appointments/Commitments**

Once “Today’s Priority Actions” is arranged to your satisfaction — and it includes all the actions you plan to accomplish in the coming week for your roles and for Sharpening the Saw — make **specific daily appointments** to accomplish those actions. Assign each to the specific time when you will accomplish the action. Doing that represents making a commitment to yourself, and you should develop the habit of keeping your commitments.

Favor setting appointments early in the day so that if something interferes with the appointment, you might have time to do it later that day — or, worst case, you reschedule the appointment for later the same week.

You’ll notice that this process is very like making a budget: defining your priorities and setting out how you’ll meet them, only in this case you are budgeting time and not money. (See [this post](#) on making a plan for money.) In either case, you generally have to rework things a bit so that your plan fits with the constraints you have (the amount of time or money you have to work with).

I never found a weekly planner book with the exact format of the worksheets above, but you can print a copy each week of one of the two PDFs in [this post](#) and use it for your Sunday planning session. Download the format you prefer and print copies as needed.

**How best to fill a bucket**

A metaphor shows why Quadrant II activities are scheduled first. Consider the week as filling a bucket using a combination of large stones (most important actions), smaller rocks (less important), pebbles (minor importance), and sand (unimportant).

If you fill the bucket by first pouring in the sand and pebbles and then adding the smaller rocks, you’ll find that you don’t have not enough room for the large stones. But if you put the large stones in first, then the smaller rocks, then pebbles, and finally sand, you can fit them all into the bucket. The large stones represent Quadrant II activities. Put those in the bucket first.

**One approach to learning/testing this method**

*Important:* If this method is new to you and you want to give it a try, I highly recommend that you commit to using the method for 9 weeks — just over a couple of months. Read the book, accept Habit 1, adopt Habit 2 by writing a draft of your mission statement (something you will often revisit to modify and refine), and get ready to practice Habit 3 by printing out 9 weekly planning worksheets. (You should, of course, practice Habit 0 every week.)
Two things to note: **First**, you practice Habits 1, 2, and 3 on your own, at your own initiative. These habits don’t require any sort of permission (or contribution) from others. The foundation developed through those three habits is what you will need to acquire for Habits 4, 5, and 6. **Second**, the reason for a 9-week trial period is because it requires about that much time for the practice to become a habit. The whole idea is to develop new habits that will help you achieve your life goals — the things you include in your mission statement. Even though your goals and values will almost certainly evolve over time, the habits you establish during the 9-week trial will continue to serve you well even as your goals change.

**Preparation for the trial run**
The first step is to have a version of your mission statement. When you go to write your mission statement (described in Habit 2), this post will be interesting and, I think, helpful. The post includes a video of a TEDx talk (by a Stanford professor who teaches design courses) on designing one’s own life. This is useful to consider as you work on your mission statement, which can be viewed as a design statement for your life.

Then, with Habits 1 and 2 established — and with your mission statement and list of your roles and goals — you can begin to practice Habit 3 by spending some time each Sunday making a plan for the coming week. (Covey’s book includes various exercises. You should do those as well.)

But before you begin the 9-week trial run, take some time to think about your goals and expectations for this experiment. Then I strongly recommend that you use Futureme.org to write an email to yourself to be delivered 9 weeks later.

In that email, write what you hope to learn and to accomplish, what difficulties you think you might encounter, and in general, describe your hopes and fears regarding your use of the method. Schedule the email to be sent to you at the end of your 9-week trial run. (FutureMe.org’s default is a delivery date a year from the date of the letter, so when you change the default delivery date, you might have to change the year as well as the month and day.)

The email will be interesting and informative, particularly if you keep a journal of your efforts during the trial period. In particular, in your journal include an entry in which you take stock of your progress after each of three phases:

1. **Beginning** — first 3 weeks: learning. This period will be awkward and confusing, and you will frequently find yourself reverting to old habits and forgetting to apply the method, so expect some frustration. (See my post “Finding pleasure in the discomfort of learning new skills” for how to minimize frustration.)

2. **Middle** — second 3 weeks: hitting your stride. This period will go better because you’ll start to get the hang of the weekly effort — first the planning, and then the doing. The new approach will start to become familiar and on its way to being a habit — an effective habit.
3. **End** — final 3 weeks: accomplishment. In this period you will solidify your gains and habits, so that you really know what you’re doing and how to do it. Moreover, at this point you will have observed some actual accomplishments and achievements from your weekly appointments doing important but non-urgent tasks. And I’m sure the Futureme letter you get at the end will be illuminating. The gap between expectations and experience is often large.

If a commitment of 9 weeks seems too daunting, you could instead commit yourself to a 6-week trial period, with three 2-week phases. I recommend not doing anything shorter because it takes some amount of time and experience to learn to use the method effectively and to see what it can deliver. We’re talking about a way to achieve your life goals; surely that deserves some serious commitment and a fair trial.

In the initial stages of any new venture, one encounters a lot of “noise” — on the negative side, from mistakes one hasn’t learned to avoid, from missteps made in ignorance (which provide the benefit of greater knowledge, which is why experience is so valuable), and so on; and on the positive side from the halo effect of a new venture (as in the rosy glow of new love, before any problems are encountered, or in the enthusiastic energy we often feel about a new interest).

It’s a good idea to continue the effort until the noise — positive or negative — subsides, so that you get a sense of the real character of the experience over time (thus the common suggestion for a longer rather than shorter courtship: “marry in haste, repent at leisure”). The effort of an extended trial can pay off handsomely, so it’s worth investing enough time to see what it’s really like, after the noise has gone and what was novel has become familiar.

You may find pop-up reminders (via calendar apps, or Apple Reminders, or Google Tasks, or the like) useful, both early in the process before habits are established and on-going to remind yourself of appointments during the week for Quadrant II tasks.