

Would you like to be more effective in life? Would you love to accomplish more at work? Or perhaps you'd like to be a more caring and committed partner.

The most practical way to get better at anything is to change yourself by developing more useful habits.

It's a known fact that we are creatures of habit. Not only do our habits influence our actions, but they also form an important part of our identity and personality.

We all want to be effective and better at something, be it professional or personal. How can this be achieved? Below is a program of habits that can make one more effective, they are as follows:

- Being enterprising
- Always have an image of the end before you begin
- Prioritize your tasks in order of importance and execute them accordingly
- Always endeavor to strike a bargain that benefits both sides
- Listen more than you talk
- Synergizing
- Keep yourself physically, emotionally and socially viable

So immerse yourself in this piece, hopefully, you can join the numerous beneficiaries of this approach!

## **For lasting change, you have to focus on the root of your behavior.**

On a quest to understand the nature of success, Stephen Covey began by studying available literature spanning a period of over 200 years, starting from 1776.

Based on his research experience, he concluded that in general, there are two ways to ensure advancement in life:

- The first method involves developing skills that produce the desired behavior. For instance, if you want to improve your relationships with others, you might want to study communication, mannerisms, and body-language techniques. This method, which has been in use since the 1920s merely enables you to avoid working on your shortcomings. Unfortunately, this doesn't translate to permanent growth.

- The second method is significantly more effective. The focus is on your character—the basic habits that constitute your perspective of the world. Given that our characters are enduring, behaviors produced as a result of them last longer. Your character always shines through. This method, which was the dominant approach prior to the 1920s, was strongly advocated for by Benjamin Franklin, as evident in his writings.

As such if you desire to change permanently, you need to be more thorough, work on your inner self. If, for example, you'd like to have a blissful marriage, you need to first become more positive and hopeful, not just adhere to a few easy rules that'll endear your spouse to you more.

So how can you work on your character? We discuss this in our next section

## **Align your view of the world with ubiquitous principles.**

Just as you need maps to navigate a foreign city, you need paradigms to navigate the world around you. A paradigm is a subjective model or perspective of the world.

After all, there are no objective observers. Everything we know about the world is influenced by our own paradigms. For example, a person with a gloomy paradigm will consider getting lost in an unknown city a frustrating waste of time, while someone with a more positive paradigm might consider it an unforeseen undertaking.

Since our character is centered around our paradigms, shifting our paradigms is vital to making enduring changes. Shifting our paradigms changes our subjective view of the world, and with this comes changes in characters and behaviors. This is why you need to identify your own paradigms; if you can't, then you will find it hard dealing with the paradigms setting you back.

For instance, I once experienced a profound paradigm shift on the subway in New York. It was a Sunday morning, and the subway bus was quite serene; people were mostly reading or resting with their eyes closed.

Then a man boarded the bus with his children. Immediately the scene changed: the children began shouting and throwing things, disturbing everyone in the car. Meanwhile, the father just sat down without much concern.

I was so irritated by the disturbance and the man's seeming lack of concern that I asked him to control his children. Softly, the man answered that he probably should, but that the children's mother had died about an hour earlier, and they were all in shock.

I suddenly felt profound compassion and a desire to help.

Though all paradigm shifts are not necessarily this fast, they can be just as powerful.

So which paradigms should you strive for?

The most effective are the ones aligned with more universally esteemed principles, like fairness, honesty, and integrity. Since these principles are universally recognized, we can see them as part of the laws of life. Therefore, the more accurately the outline of your paradigms checks the boxes of these basic life principles, the more plausible your views are and the better your chances of achieving success.

As we will see, the seven habits are all geared towards achieving deeply rooted in basic life principles.

## **The first habit: Be enterprising and take control of your social environment.**

An important difference between humans and animals is their reaction to external stimuli. Animals, in general, are subject to respond to stimuli instinctively, and in accordance with what their nature dictates. We humans, in contrast, can reflect on a stimulus and redirect ourselves to respond in a specific, desirable way.

This implies that, as humans, not only do we have the ability to respond to our external environment, we also have a higher dimensional ability to proactively influence it.

The ability of proactive participation is a potential, which can be achieved, or not achieved. You would still find people whose reactions are mostly animal-like, even in the most rational people there are situations in which their animalistic reactions set in. For example, for people in the former category of the less rational, you may find them in a crummy mood if it's rainy outside or if other people have treated them poorly. For such people, phrases like; "it was out of hand", "it's not my fault" are common.

People who are proactive, on the other hand, exert their will on the social atmosphere around them. They take charge of their own lives and make deliberately thought out choices about their behavior. You hear them say things like; "I've decided to..." or "Let's try to find a solution to this problem." They anticipate possible hurdles in the way of success and find ways to overcome them.

The contrast between the two attitudes can also be exemplified by two concentric circles. The outer and inner circles being your circle of concern and circle of influence respectively. The circle of concern represents all the things you're concerned about, ranging from the payment of utilities to the more devastating threat of a nuclear war. The smaller inner circle of Influence, on the other hand, represents all the things you can actually do something about.

While proactive people focus on their Circles of Influence, choosing to deal with things within their control, and expand this circle as they move forward, gradually taking control of other less familiar things, reactive people focus on their Circles of Concern, fretting over things they can't alter, and thus can't get anything. The result is the shrinking of their circle of influence.

Proactivity can be an immensely powerful tool. Consider Viktor Frankl, who, during World War II was incarcerated. Despite his misery, he refused to be controlled by his environment. This freedom did not only become apparent in his actions, like a tiny spark that blazes into a roaring fire, but it also inspired those around him, including some of the guards.

Similarly, you too have the power to control the interaction between a response and a stimulus. You can afford yourself the freedom to modify your behaviors and emotions circumstantially. Do not allow the enormity of a problem pull an impetuous response out of you. Rather exercise your freedom and activate a controlled response. You'll find your capacity for proactively flourishing.

## **The second habit: Imagine the result of an action before you act.**

An action is a two-step process. First, it is imagined, then it is physically executed.

For example, if you intend to build a house, you'll first imagine in its entirety the kind of house you want, accounting for every detail in the structure, before a single brick is committed. If you don't work this thoughtfully, you could lose a lot in money and time. Without a well-formulated plan to follow, there'd no doubt be costly missteps, like forgetting to leave room for stairs leading from the ground floor to the second.

That's why it's important to have the desired end firmly in your mind before you start any task. The more thorough and realistic your mental image of the rudimentary details of a task is, the better its execution will be – and, hence, the better the outcome.

This kind of visual anticipation seems to apply to all possible situations. Most competitive sprinters, for example, are well practiced in visualizing how they will bolt from the starting block, complete a perfect race and finish in the first place.

So whether at work or at home, take the time required for imagination. As the saying goes, "Better to ask twice than to lose your way once." It's much more rewarding to spend time anticipating the action and visualizing the desired outcome than just continue on without any definite direction or purpose. If you initially imagine the step-wise execution of a task, its actual execution could feel more like a *Deja vu*.

To get started, you could think about one of your upcoming projects and write down exactly what results you expect and lay down the relevant steps in the lead up to actualizing those results.

I am sure you have heard of the phrase "the bigger picture" that commonly pops up in a lot of conversations. Imagining a vivid image of the end from the beginning does not only work for small individual projects. As you'll learn in the next blink, you should also have a clear view of your larger life goals, and have your smaller projects fit in like gears in a machine.

## **The second habit continued: Define your personal life goals and let them serve as a guide to you.**

Here's a small mental exercise. Imagine that it's three years in the future, in which you have sadly passed away. At your funeral, you can see your loved ones – family, friends, and colleagues-crying, saying their goodbyes and honoring the life you lived with eulogies. At that moment, what would you like them to say about you? How do you want them to remember you, and for what?

Unfortunately, many people waste their time on goals that don't matter much, because they never properly defined their lifelong goals. In short, they can hardly tell the difference between being efficient and being effective.

Being efficient means getting the maximum amount done in the shortest amount of time. It is more specific to a particular task. But this is pointless if you don't know what you're striving for and why you're doing that task. It's a bit like climbing a ladder that's set against the wrong wall: you're making progress but in the wrong direction. Efficiency at doing a task doesn't make the task relevant to the grand scheme of things.

Being effective, on the other hand, means being efficient at tasks that actually fit as a gear into the "machine of tasks", it means having your ladder on the right wall – that is, knowing what your destination in life is. Effective people don't just thoughtlessly pursue things like money and fame for their general value; they focus on what's important and fits into their larger life goals. Everything else is secondary.

So how can you be resolute about your destination in life?

One useful method is to try to answer the aforementioned funeral questions, and then use your answers as a basis for formulating a personal mission statement. This is a blueprint in which you define your own creed, meaning what kind of person you want to be, what you hope to achieve in your life, as well as the basic values and principles underlying these goals.

The mission statement is your personal doctrine, an established standard by which everything else can be measured and evaluated. This could serve as a guide for aligning your actions.

Some thoughts that could be included in a person's mission statement might be "I value my work and family equally and will seek to balance my time spent on them. I value a just and fair society and will strive to make my voice heard in political decisions. I will be proactive in pursuing my life goals and will not simply be swept along by circumstances." And so on.

As this is a foundational document in your life, you can't prepare it superficially. You will have to do some deep soul searching, thinking, rethinking to get it right. And given that

beliefs are subject to time and environment, you might have to revise your personal constitution from time to time.

## **The third habit: Prioritize your tasks and execute them in order of importance.**

Now that you have a mission, how can you translate it into reality? Simple: by abiding by it, day after day. Of course, in the midst of your everyday activities, this can be challenging, and it requires good time-management skills.

Unfortunately, most time-management techniques enhance efficiency, not effectiveness. You don't have to apply complicated techniques. Most of the time, all you need to do is apply the simple maxim: "first things first." This means properly prioritizing everything to do, and doing the most important things first.

Okay, but how can you determine the hierarchy of importance of the things you do?

You can begin by categorizing your tasks based on a two-dimensional grid: critical and important.

- In the top-left quadrant is tasks that are important and critical, like crises that must be attended to immediately.
- In the top right quadrant are tasks that are important but not critical, like, say, writing down your long term goals, and future plans.
- In the lower left quadrant are tasks that are critical but not important, like, say, phone calls, text messages and colleagues at your desk asking for your favor.
- And in the lower right quadrant are tasks that are not important and not critical, like playfully surfing the web, and scrolling down Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook pages – these are complete time-wasting tasks.

Of all these quadrants, your focus should be the second quadrant. These tasks could prove to be the most impactful or life-changing. Moreover, if you work hard enough on the tasks in quadrant two, you'll most probably scale down the tasks that fall into quadrant one. Tasks in quadrant 1 are usually very difficult to accomplish and could be unnecessarily time-consuming, therefore moving down a step to quadrant two, which is not only less difficult but offers a potential scale back of the burden of the first quadrant.

Unfortunately, many people don't prioritize the tasks in quadrant two. For instance, while working with a group of shopping-center managers, I found that although they knew that building a relationship with store owners was the most positively impactful thing they could do, they still spent less than five percent of their time doing it. Instead, they were constantly busy dealing with quadrant one issues like reports, calls, and interruptions. After advising them on a more effective strategy, they decided to start spending a third of their time with the

store owners. This change in paradigm was worthwhile, and its effect was tremendous: both satisfaction and lease revenue shot up.

A good first step towards perpetuating this habit in your life is to identify a quadrant-two activity that you've been neglecting – one that would be impactful if done well – and then commit in writing to doing more of it.

## **The fourth habit: Think “win-win.”**

When you interact with others, what kind of outcome do you usually look for?

Most people's worldviews are shaped by a strong "win-lose" mindset. This means they consider an association with the family, friends or colleagues a competition. Where everything is on the table and up for grabs.

But most situations in life don't need to be battlefields. There could just be enough pie for everyone, and it is far more productive and less straining to work towards a "win-win" solution that is beneficial for everyone, rather than fighting for a “win-lose” outcome.

This is especially because one major disadvantage of the "win-lose" mentality is that it could easily end up in a "lose-lose" one. After a bitter fight, both parties end up losing, putting everything in disarray. Meanwhile, the dog gets the entire pie, which was knocked to the floor during the argument.

Furthermore, it is almost impossible to establish a long-term positive relationship with whom you constantly compete. You are bound to employ strategies that could end your relationship or pact with your competitors, especially if you are in the business of rendering services.

For example, if your company sells services to a customer, and you argue for a higher price with a strong “win-lose” mindset, you may succeed in increasing the value of the deal a little bit. But the customer will probably prefer to take their business elsewhere the next time, so that, in the long term, you lose also.

But if you are someone that strives for “win-win” scenarios, you'll find yourself building lots of positive relationships because each interaction strengthens the relationship, rather than eroding it. In the previous example, if you'd instead sought a mutually satisfactory deal, the customer would probably remember that you'd been fair – and he or she would come back again the next time, thereby increasing your profits in the long run. People are usually happier when you put before them a situation that is a “win-win.”

Although it might be a difficult task, it's usually useful to keep communicating and re-modifying the transaction until a solution that benefits both parties is reached, but the reward is a lasting positive relationship and the creation of mutual trust, from which all parties can profit.

A good way of coming up with a “win-win” solution is to first look at the problem or negotiation from the other party's angle. Imagine yourself in their shoes and write down what

you believe would constitute a win for them. Then adapt your stand in the negotiations to the latter. Finally, approach the other party and ask if he'd be willing to try to find a mutually satisfactory agreement.

## **The fourth habit continued: Invest in your emotional bank account- to form stable and fruitful relationships.**

A relationship with another person is akin to a bank account, but an emotional one: by putting time, effort and goodwill into it, the balance of the account accrues, reflecting a build-up of trust between both parties. A healthy or well-credited balance on your account implies that communication between both parties is flexible, such that any miscommunication is quickly sorted out.

If, on the other hand, the balance is low, any miscommunication can easily lead to hostile confrontations: every word has to be carefully chosen to avoid explosive conflict.

So how can you grow your balance?

You can credit your account by, finding a win-win solution, fulfilling the promises you've made or genuinely listening to the other person.

A withdrawal, on the other hand, would be fighting for a win-lose solution, breaking a promise or insincerely listening to the other person.

To build strong, long-lasting relationships, there are several major deposits you can make: always keep promises, be forthright about what you expect of the other person and be courteous and sensitive even in the most trivial matters.

Another major deposit is maintaining the utmost personal integrity. This means being loyal even in the absence of your partner, and never bad-mouthing them or keeping their secrets when required. This will prove to those who are present that you can be trusted.

But perhaps one of the most important deposits you can make is really trying to understand other people because this is probably the most effective way knowing what's important to them – and thus which things they consider deposits.

A friend of the author understood the importance of this kind of deposit. Though he wasn't a fan of baseball at all, he took his son on a road trip one summer to see every major-league team play. It took six weeks and was very expensive, but it also strengthened their relationship a great deal. When asked if he liked baseball that much, the friend said, "No, but I like my son that much."

If you do unavoidably make a withdrawal from the account, endeavor to apologize sincerely. It takes the strength of character to do so, and people are usually more than happy to forgive a repentant sinner.



## **The fifth habit: Discuss your opinions only after you have listened to others’.**

Imagine walking into a doctor’s office and having the doctor listen absentmindedly to your description of your ailment, only to suddenly say “I have heard enough”, handing you a prescription afterward.

Or what if an optician gave you his own glasses, without actually checking what eye problem you have, claiming his glasses should be able to counteract the problem since it works for him.

You probably wouldn’t trust their advice.

Though these examples sound strange, we behave similarly in our everyday lives. Instead of listening to what others have to say, we project our situations onto them, coming up with quick solutions, without thoroughly analyzing if these solutions actually apply

In general, such advice is seldom welcome, since people usually only trust someone else’s judgment, if they feel their situations are well understood.

So if you want to be respected as a good listener, you need to develop the skill of empathic listening. This necessitates a change of paradigm from "I’m listening so that I can provide an answer" to "I’m listening so that I can deeply understand him/her."

Empathic listening means trying to share the feelings or the train of thought of the other party so you can understand them both intellectually and emotionally.

According to experts in communication, our body language accounts for 60 percent of our communication. So to better practice empathic listening, you should attend more to feelings, behaviors and their implicit and explicit meanings. One way to work on your empathic listening skills is to observe a conversation without hearing the words. What emotions do you think underlie the communication?

It takes time and effort to master this skill, especially because you might have to make some inferences from unclear modes of communication, but the later rewards are well worth it. If people notice you are an empathic listener, they will open up to you better, and consider your opinions and advice. You also get to know them better. People generally just need a good, appreciative listener before they can actually engage deeply and sincerely.

## **The sixth habit: Synergize by treating others with openness and respect.**

We now come to a habit that all the previous habits you've learned have prepared you for—synergizing. Synergy is an interaction of elements, in this case, habits, where the combined effect of the elements exceeds the individual elements. One plus one can equal three or more.

So how can you implement this principle in your own social interactions?

We all see the world differently. We each have our own particular strengths. You can leverage the power of synergy by being open with others and valuing these differences.

When people truly synergize, they listen to each other, put themselves in each other's shoes and complement their strengths with that of others, in order to achieve something great. They're on the same side, combining their efforts towards tackling a shared problem, not fighting each other.

When David Lilienthal was tasked with heading the Atomic Energy Commission after World War II, he put together a group of highly influential and capable people. Knowing that all differed in agendas or goals, he tried to get them to know each other by scheduling regular social interactive meetings among them. Although he was heavily criticized, this got the people into a synergistic mindset. When disagreements arose, instead of opposition, the people tried to genuinely understand each other, leading to a more productive environment.

The path to synergizing starts with seeing your interactions with others as an adventure. You may not be able to entirely control these interactions, but you should still embrace it with complete wholeheartedly.

This requires a considerable amount of self-confidence, as well as the belief that the combined contribution of the parties can lead to something great, even if the journey is uncertain.

So make a list of the people with whom your discussions have been less successful. If you were more confident and open-minded, do you think you could synergize your perspectives?

## **The seventh habit: Keep yourself wholesomely capable of executing relevant tasks.**

If lumberjacks spent all their time sawing down trees but never once paused to sharpen their saws, soon enough their tools will be ineffective.

Similarly, if you never take care of yourself, as you go about executing your tasks, any gains in effectiveness you achieve will be short-lived, for you'll soon exhaust yourself and won't be able to maintain any of the good habits you've developed.

That's why "sharpening your saw" is essential for lasting effectiveness in each of the four key dimensions of your life:

To stay physically fit, you need to exercise regularly, eat healthily and avoid undue stress.

Your spiritual health also contributes to lasting effectiveness. This could mean praying or meditating, or simply regularly reflecting on your own norms and values.

To stay mentally healthy, keeping your mind agile and fresh is very important, you can achieve these by reading plenty of good books, avoid spending too much time in front of your television screen and doing some writing of your own – be it letters or poetry or a diary. Organizing and planning things are also good exercises to keep your mind sharp and fresh.

Last but not least, it's important to take care of your social and emotional health by deliberately seeking to understand others, towards building important positive relationships with them. Try as much as possible to engage in projects that advance your life and theirs.

Consciously make time to recuperate and reinvigorate. Even though your busy life might not permit you to devote some time to that, but given these are vital to sustaining effectiveness it will be more productive to find the time to do them.

To make sure you truly “sharpen your saw”, write down activities that could contribute to your well-being in each of the four dimensions. Then pick one activity in each as a goal for the week and, afterward, evaluate your performance. This will help you strive for balanced renewal in all areas.

## **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change by Stephen R. Covey, Jim Collins Book Review**

For lasting effectiveness, adopt these seven habits:

- Be proactive: You have a natural need to exert influence on the world around you, so don't spend your time as a passive contributor to your social environment-reacting to external events and circumstances. Take charge and assume responsibility for your life.
- Begin with an end in mind: Don't spend your life without a purpose in reach and tackling whatever job comes to hand. Have a vision for the future and align your actions accordingly to make it into a reality.

- Put first things first: To prioritize your work, focus on what's important, meaning the things that bring you closer to your vision of the future. Don't get distracted by urgent but ultimately unimportant tasks.
- Think win-win: When negotiating with others, don't try to get the lion's share, but rather find a sharing formula that is acceptable and beneficial to all parties. Added to getting a fair share, you would be able to build strong positive relationships.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood: When someone presents us with a problem, we often jump hastily into providing solutions. This is most unsuitable. You should listen more than you talk. Only after you have understood others, should you make a recommendation
- Synergize: Embrace the guiding principle that a combination of contributions of many outweighs separate individual contributions. This will help you to achieve goals unattainable on your own.
- Sharpen your saw: Don't overwork yourself unnecessarily. Maintain a wholesome lifestyle, so that you can stay effective in the long-term.

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