

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families – by Stephen Covey

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In 1989 Stephen Covey wrote one of the most widely read self-improvement books of the late 20th Century, 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' in which he identified seven habits which successful people exhibit. This book he explains how these same principles can be applied to families.

Covey contends that *'the 7 Habits are based on universal, timeless and self-evident principles that are just as true in the world of human relationships as the law of gravity is in the physical world.... These habits are not tricks or techniques. They're not quick fixes... They are habits – established patterns of thinking and doing things – that all successful families have in common'*¹

Good families are off track 90 percent of the time!

It is important to recognise that you will not be 'on track' all of the time. A good analogy is an aeroplane that will be off course for most of the journey. Extending this analogy the pilot will have three essential tools that many go through life without –

1. A clear vision of his destination
2. A flight plan
3. A compass

Keeping the family 'on track' has become more difficult over the past 50 years due to changes in society. There is therefore more responsibility on the parents, as there is less support from the community at large.

Habit 1 – Be Proactive

*'Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'*² This powerful concept establishes not only the opportunity, but also our personal responsibility, for the course our lives.

*'What we all need is a "pause button" – something that enables us to insert a pause between what happens to us, and our response to it, and to choose our own response.'*³ Habits 1, 2 and 3 focus on how to create that pause button and how to act on principles and values rather than reacting based on feelings or circumstances. As the choices we make all lead to outcomes, by improving the quality of our choices, we can improve those outcomes.

Our ability to utilise our freedom of choice is based on four unique human gifts⁴ –

1. Self-awareness
2. Conscience
3. Imagination and
4. Independent Will

The development of these gifts like the development of a muscle requires work. The essence of proactivity, and the use of these four gifts, lies in taking responsibility and initiative by focusing on the things that we can do something about. This introduces the concept of the circle of concern and the circle of influence. Proactive people focus on the circle of influence and as a result that circle increases.

¹ Page 15

² Taken from 'Man's Search for Meaning' by Viktor E. Frenkl

³ Page 29

⁴ Page 29

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One way to tell whether you are in your circle of influence or circle of concern is to listen to your own language.

<i>Circle of Concern</i>	<i>Circle of Influence</i>
Blaming	Accepting responsibility
Accusing	Accepting responsibility
Reactive	Proactive
'I can't....'	'I can....'
'If only....'	'I can....'

Building the Emotional Bank Account

The emotional bank account represents the quality of the relationship that you have with another person. You *'can make deposits by proactively doing things that build trust in the relationship, or you can make withdrawals by reactively doing things that decrease the level of trust. The balance of trust in the account determines how well you communicate and solve problems with another person.'*⁵

Proactively making deposits is something that we can always do. In fact every problem can become an opportunity to make a deposit. For example –

- Someone's 'bad day' becomes an opportunity to be kind
- An offence becomes an opportunity to apologise or forgive
- Someone's gossip becomes an opportunity to be loyal to those not present

*'The decision to be the creative force of our own lives is the most fundamental choice of all.'*⁶ This is the basis of Habit 1 – Be proactive.

Habit 2 – Begin with the End in Mind

'The end in mind' is your destination. It is about creating a clear vision of what you and your family stand for, and what you hope to achieve. Vision is the power behind every successful individual and organisation. *'Vision is greater than 'baggage' – greater than the negative baggage of the past and even the accumulated baggage of the present. Tapping into this sense of vision gives you the power and the purpose to rise above the baggage and act based on what really matters most.'*⁷

This chapter focuses on developing a family mission statement as the practical application of the habit. In a business environment it is developed by answering the question - *'What is the essential mission or purpose of this organisation, and what is its main strategy in accomplishing that purpose?'*⁸

Covey describes the process that his family went through in developing their mission statement. This involved –

1. Creating a vision of what they wanted their family to be like
2. Determining what principles they would live by
3. A shared vision that would be owned by all family members

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⁶ Page 66

⁷ Page 72

⁸ Page 73

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Using the Aeroplane analogy, the family mission statement provides both the destination and the compass. Your vision and values are a yardstick against which you can measure your progress, so that corrections can continually be made, to ensure that you reach your destination.

This then becomes a three-step process –

1. Explore what your family is all about
2. Write your families mission statement
3. Use it to stay on track

A useful aid in this process are a series of questions that can be used to arrive at the core values of not only a family, but an individual or organisation.⁹

In working together to arrive at a mission statement it is helpful to set some ground rules –

- Listen with respect – ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to provide input
- Restate accurately to show that you understand
- Write down the ideas

It is important to remember that you should be focusing on the possibilities, not limitations.

As with most truly important things in life, the process is as important as the product, so be careful to keep the following 'watch outs' in mind when preparing your family mission statement –

1. Don't 'announce' it – involving everyone takes time and patience
2. Don't rush it – deep and genuine involvement, listening and joint effort are required
3. Don't ignore it – beginning with the end in mind is a **habit**, not an **event**. Writing it down is only the beginning; you then have to live it.

Habit 3 – Put First Things First

'Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of thing which matter least.' Goethe¹⁰

Habit 2 tells you what '**first things**' are, habit 3 has to do with the discipline and commitment to live by those things. Often people feel that there is a gap between what really matters most to them, such as their family, their purpose or vision, and the way that they live their daily lives. The reason for this often goes back to Habit 2 - we are not really connected to our deepest priorities.

Creating Structures in the Family

Enormous social and technological changes that have taken place over the past 50. Most businesses and professions are being reinvented and restructured to accommodate this new reality. But according to Covey the same kind of restructuring has not occurred in the family.

A key starting point is to establishing weekly family time to plan, teach, solve problems and to have fun together. All of these activities help to build the emotional bank account.

One of the reasons that the family is so critical today, is the shift in societal support and values over the past 50 years. Although the table below represents US experience it is not dissimilar from that in most western societies.¹¹

⁹ Page 89

¹⁰ Page 114

¹¹ Pages 121 - 136

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	40 – 50 Years Ago	Today
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Predominantly radio Little or no TV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average child watches 7 hours TV per day Computer games Internet
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers valued Top disciplinary problems: chewing gum, noise, dress code, littering, running in corridors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assaults on teachers Top disciplinary problems: drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's chance of growing up with both parents – 80% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's chance of growing up with both parents – < 50% Single parent families increase 350%
Parents at Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40 hour work week Single bread winner < 20% of children need day care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 45 – 50 hours work/week Both parents working > 80% of children need day care
Family Rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family dinner Family gatherings Little or no TV Close extended family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each week a school aged child spends – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.8 hours reading 5.6 hours homework 21 hours watching TV Adults watch 15 hrs/week
Juvenile Violent Crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16.1 incidents per 100,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75.8 incidents per 100,000 Up 500% from 1950's Up 22% from 1990

The most difficult part of establishing any new habit is making the commitment. Once this has been done the next step is to *'put in the big rocks first'*.¹² To represent our existing time commitments Covey uses the analogy of a bucket already full to the brim. It is almost impossible to cram additional rocks into it - you have to empty it first, then put in the 'big rocks' first. This can be achieved by organising your week around roles and goals, rather than activities.

Habit 4 – Think 'Win-Win'

Habits 4, 5 and 6 are linked. They work together to create new ideas and solutions that are better than could be achieved by any one individual.

- Habit 4 – Think 'win-win' is the root. It's the fundamental paradigm of seeking mutual benefit.
- Habit 5 – Seek first to understand...then to be understood is the route. Is the path to understanding.
- Habit 6 – Synergise is the fruit. It is the result. A reward for the effort which creates a something better than $1 + 1 = 2$

These three habits are about creating the social weather that helps us ask the question *'Would you be willing to search for a solution that is better than what either of us is now proposing?'*¹³

¹² Page 160

¹³ Page 171

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The consequence of not working towards win-win is to accept either win-lose or lose-win, neither of which is a satisfactory outcome. The principle behind win-win is that what is important to another person must be as important to you as the other person is to you.

Cultivating the spirit of win-win

Inexperienced or immature people tend to act on their wants, and not their needs. Often unpopular decisions made by parents appear to be win-lose. The key is in the relationship as measured by the emotional bank account. *'People will basically allow you to deal with their needs rather than their wants when they trust you and know that you care.'*¹⁴

An important step is creating win-win agreements, which contain – desired results, guidelines, resources, accountability and consequences.

Thinking win-win is at the heart of what family is all about. But this is often difficult to remember when caught up in the emotion of the moment. The 'pause' between stimulus and response discussed in Habit 1 is critical, as it provides the opportunity to connect with the 'big picture' or destination which was established by Habit 2 (Begin with the End in Mind).

Habit 5 – Seek First to Understand...Then to be Understood

The way we see the world is not necessarily the way other people see it. *'In fact, people do not see the world as it is; they see it as they are – or as they have been conditioned to be.'*¹⁵ It is important to seek to understand before you seek to influence – to diagnose before prescribing. *'We each look at the world with our own pair of glasses – glasses that come out of our own unique background and conditioning experiences, glasses that create our value system, our expectations, our implicit assumptions about the way the world is and the way it should be'*¹⁶

Communication breakdowns result when people interpret the same event differently *'As we project our conditioning experiences onto the outside world, we assume we're seeing the world the way it is. But we're not. We're seeing the world as we are – or as we have been conditioned to be. And until we gain the capacity to step out of our own autobiography – to set aside our own glasses and really see the world through the eyes of others – we will never be able to build deep, authentic relationships and have the ability to influence others in positive ways.'*¹⁷

Empathic listening overcomes the two major communications problems, perception and semantics. Perception - how people interpret the same data. Semantics - how people interpret the same word. It means trying to see the world through another's eyes, within their frame of reference. Communication is enhanced not only by the practical reality of truly understanding the other persons point of view from their perspective, but also because it builds trust by making significant deposits to the persons emotional bank account.

'Seeking first to understand' means just that. Often we seek first to be understood, so we evaluate, advise, probe or interpret from our own perspective, our own values. An understanding response reflects back the other person's feelings. If the level of trust is high, this can often be achieved quickly, if not, time will need to be taken as you focus on the underlying meaning, which is found more in feelings and emotions than in the words being used.

¹⁴ Page 185

¹⁵ Page 203

¹⁶ Page 203

¹⁷ Page 204

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Empathic understanding is not easy to do. It takes character to take the time to understand someone when you really know what they are thinking (you usually don't) or when you're sure that you have the perfect answer (which you usually don't).

When the other person is truly understood, to their satisfaction, you can move to the second stage of 5th Habit, seek to be understood. However, having taken the time to understand first, you are better able to speak to others in language that they understand.

Habit 6 - Synergise

Synergy is creative teamwork. It is the magic that happens when one plus one equals three, the third or better alternative that is generated from the interaction between people. Synergy lies in the relationship between the people who are interacting almost as if creating a third 'person' - you, me and we. It's a risky business though, because the parties going into a situation don't know what's going to come out of it, but know that it's going to be better than anything they individually brought in.

Appreciating other people's uniqueness and living with the differences is often difficult, as we want to mould people in our own image. The key to creating synergy is learning to value, even celebrate the difference.

Habits 4, 5 and 6 often work in conjunction by involving people in the problem and working together to arrive at a solution. The key is to focus on the issue and the desired results, not on personalities and positions. The following process demonstrates how the habits combine to solve problems.¹⁸

1. Establish what the problem is from everyone's point of view. Work at it until people can express each person's position to that person's satisfaction.
2. Identify the key issues. Look at the problem together and clearly identify the issues to be resolved.
3. Define what would constitute a fully acceptable solution. What would be a win for each person? Establish the criteria, refine and prioritise.
4. Think of other options that would meet these criteria. Look for creative new approaches and solutions.

Synergy can also occur when people work together in a way in which one person's weaknesses are complemented by the other strengths. This requires self-awareness, as first you must be able to acknowledge your own strengths and weaknesses. Covey refers to this kind of synergy as transactional plus. Where one person exchanges their weaknesses for another's strengths.

Habit 7 - Sharpen the Saw

Sharpening the saw means attending regularly to renewal in all of the life balance areas. Covey identifies four key areas of life, Physical, Social/Emotional, Spiritual and Mental and looks at renewal for both the individual and family.

In a family environment repeating habits of family renewal create traditions. These will obviously vary from family to family and examples from Covey's and other families are given. Probably the most important of these traditions is having fun together.

From Survival.... To Stability.... To Success.... To Significance

¹⁸ Page 268

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Covey brings the Seven Habits together in a variation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the movement from survival to stability, to success and onto significance. He contends that as we move through these stages we progress from problem solving to creating. In the areas of survival and stability we primarily focus our mental energy on problem solving. As we move toward success and significance the emphasis shifts to creating goals, vision and purpose that transcend the family itself. *'When you're problem minded, you want to eliminate something. When you're opportunity or vision minded, you want to bring something into existence'*¹⁹ and this is a totally different mind-set. This same transition applies equally to businesses as outlined in 'Built to Last'²⁰.

Covey uses the concept of a Force Field to consider the impact of *'driving and restraining forces'*²¹ on the path from survival to significance. He contends that it is necessary to completely remove the restraining forces or they will eventually restore the old equilibrium.

There are four leadership roles that move a family (or business) along the path from survival to significance –

1. Modelling – you cannot guide people unless you 'walk the talk'
2. Mentoring – building trusting relationships that opens others to influence and teaching
3. Organising – aligning structures and systems to allow you to accomplish objectives
4. Teaching – the above are the preconditions that enable teaching to take place.

Thinking about these roles highlights the distinction between **managing** and **leading**, between doing what is **urgent** or what is **important**. *'Family life today is a high-wire trapeze act with no safety net. Only through principle-centred leadership can you provide a net in the form of moral authority in the culture itself, and simultaneously build the mind-set and the skill-set to perform the necessary "acrobatics" required.'*²²

In Summary

This book follows in the tradition of Covey's original best seller, 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' and is both thought provoking and easy to read. Though it does not specifically address the issues of family business, the concepts that it contains can easily be applied to families in business. The principles themselves have relevance to all, be they applied in a personal, family or business context. Many useful war stories are incorporated and each chapter concludes with suggestions for implementing the ideas.

¹⁹ Page 322

²¹ By J C Collins & J I Porras.

²¹ Page 323

²² Page 341

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