

# The Habit of Being Proactive

The first of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is being proactive. By following Covey's guiding principles, each of us can become more effective in our lives, understand how to be truly proactive, and take ownership of our decisions.

**H**ave you ever asked yourself what you can do to be a more effective leader, boss, team member, or worker? This type of retrospection of our performance can help determine what we can do to make ourselves more effective. Effectiveness occurs at several different levels, including technical, motivational, and emotional. We could be very strong technically but not highly effective in our relationships. As we evaluate ourselves, it's critical for us to have both the self-awareness to recognize areas that need improvement and the drive to follow through to make the positive changes we desire.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey brought to light guiding principles and the habits that can help each of us become more effective in every area of our lives. He developed the habits and guiding principles through extensive research about the recurrent themes in the literature on wisdom.

## The Four Guiding Principles

Four guiding principles fuel the seven habits. The first guiding principle is the formula for effectiveness: P/PC balance = effectiveness. P stands for production, and PC stands for production capacity. What does it mean to have a P/PC balance, and why does it equal effectiveness? We want production, and most of us spend time each day producing. But are we doing it effectively? We can spend time on one of two things: (1) improving our production capacity or (2) improving our production. If your ax is dull, you waste more time trying to chop wood with it rather than if you stopped to sharpen it. We must seek a balance in our lives that includes an adequate amount of time for continuous improvement and development. If we can balance P and PC, then we'll maximize our effectiveness. We can't spend all of our time on production or all of our time on improving our production capacity. The proper balance of P and PC will make us highly effective. If you aren't working on increasing your production capacity, I challenge you to spend at least two hours a week to expand your capacity. You could mentor a coworker, improve communica-

tions with your boss, or increase your technical knowledge and skills. Start today by evaluating the areas of improvement that would best help you increase your personal effectiveness in reaching your professional and personal goals.

The second principle is the power of paradigms. Put simply, a paradigm is "the way an individual perceives, understands, and interprets the surrounding world." Our perceptions of what we see and hear are just that—perceptions. Understanding the existence of paradigms opens our awareness to the fact that two people can have different ideas about an issue yet both can be true. This self-realization begins by understanding that our emotions and feelings are influenced by our paradigms. "We see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or, as we are conditioned to see it." Therefore, "If we want to make relatively minor changes in our lives, we can perhaps appropriately focus on our attitudes and behaviors. But if we want to make significant, quantum change, we need to work on our basic paradigms." This is why solving a very complex problem frequently requires us to change how we approach it. Our own per-



ceptions of the problem can inhibit us from finding the best solution.

The third principle deals with how we make deposits and withdrawals from the “emotional bank accounts” of others. We make deposits by being kind and courteous, keeping promises, and apologizing. We make withdrawals by being unkind and discourteous, disloyal, conceited, and arrogant. Additionally, “our motives for making deposits should be sincere or others will feel manipulated and grow cynical and distrustful.”

The fourth principle is the “law of the harvest.” We reap what we sow, and there’s a price to be paid for everything. Unless you pay the price, you can’t reap the rewards. The law of the harvest stresses that there are no quick fixes, no free lunches, and that no step can be skipped. Covey quotes a proverb to make his point: “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”

## Self-Awareness

Effectiveness in all of the habits requires effectiveness in the first habit: Be proactive. Because our paradigms influence our perceptions of reality, an important part of being proactive is being self-aware. Self-awareness is the ability to “determine whether [our paradigms] are reality- or principle-based or if they are a function of conditioning and conditions.” Self-awareness allows us to understand our motives, desires, and innermost thoughts and intentions.

Another part of self-awareness is realizing our own self-worth. Our self-worth doesn’t come from how

others see us. It’s about recognizing that although our DNA, upbringing, life experiences, and environment may have influenced our lives, each of us is a unique individual who isn’t defined by these things alone. Our character is determined by the choices we make.

According to Covey, there are three main social paradigms: genetic, psychic, and environmental determinism. He notes that the stimulus/response theory is the basis for each of these social paradigms and reviews them to highlight that many individuals base their self-worth and responses on their circumstances and social scripting. It’s important to be aware of the power of this social scripting.

## Choose Your Response

In contrast, Covey discusses the experiences of Victor Frankl to highlight that we have the power to choose our response. Through the experiences and choices Frankl made in Nazi death camps during World War II, he found that “he could decide within himself how all of this was going to affect him.” This basic principle is at the core of the habit of being proactive: I can’t always choose what happens to me, but I can choose how to react to it. Being proactive is realizing our freedom to choose a response.

When something happens to me, I can either be “reactive” by letting others or circumstances dictate my response, or I can be self-aware by using my conscience and imagination to allow me to choose a response that I know is appropriate. Covey notes that “it’s not what happens to us, but our response to

what happens to us that hurts us.” Covey isn’t saying physical things won’t hurt us but that “our character, our basic identity, does not have to be hurt at all.” A proactive person is responsible and takes initiative. Self-awareness is an essential skill that enables us to see our circumstances and choose an action. Understanding our current circle of concern and current circle of influence is a critical area of self-awareness.

Our circle of concern is everything we’re concerned about in which “we have no particular mental or emotional involvement,” and our circle of influence includes the concerns that we can impact and change. When we’re proactive, we choose to make an impact within our circle of influence and to take actions that enable us to be change agents in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. This expands our circle of influence. There are situations over which we can have both direct and indirect control, and realizing there are some situations over which we have no control is an important step in influencing outcomes that will allow us to recognize opportunities where we can use our influence.

Although we have the ability to choose our actions, it’s critical to understand that we aren’t at liberty to choose the consequences. Our actions have consequences, and others may take actions that have consequences on us. At its very nature, this may seem contradictory to Covey’s points on determining outcomes. Some of our actions can create significant outcomes that we must deal with. At all times, we can choose how to react to those outcomes, and we

can use our influence to further shape the results of the consequences. In these circumstances, Covey emphasizes using self-awareness and the importance of realizing that consequences that we may not like will result from our mistakes. We have to recognize and admit that these consequences are the results of our actions in order to be fully self-aware because “our response to any mistake affects the quality of the next moment.” We choose the next step. We choose the next outcome from the mistake and don’t accept that we’re powerless.

### **Make and Keep Commitments**

Once we understand how these principles work in our lives, we can use our imagination and creative talents to set goals for and make commitments to ourselves and others. We can then choose to keep those commitments and achieve those goals. This is the core of being proactive, but it starts with being self-aware and using our freedom to choose. The challenge for each of us is to choose to be proactive in every situation. Making this first choice will empower us to be highly effective in both our personal and professional lives. When we put these principles to work and put the habit of being proactive in our lives, we’ll take action when needed. We’ll bring appropriate concerns to our manager before they become significant problems. We’ll offer solutions when we bring up issues. We’ll work to keep our technical skill set current to avoid rework and to find better ways to complete our work. By setting an example, we’ll help make those around us better as well. The first

step is to make the personal choice to be proactive. **SF**

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