

# Sharpen the Saw

Stephen Covey's final habit of highly effective people, *Sharpen the Saw*, is the culmination of the preceding six habits. Sharpening the saw is the key to continuous personal and professional improvement through self-renewal and self-examination.

Putting Stephen Covey's first six habits into practice can help us be more effective in our daily interactions. We can be proactive and focused on reaching meaningful goals through teamwork and relationships with others. But these efforts may result in burnout and stagnation if we don't combine them with the seventh, and final, habit: Sharpen the Saw.

Sharpening the saw is about self-renewal and enlarging both our capacity for action and our circle of influence. The metaphor contained within the habit's name is simple enough. Without ensuring that we continue to work on our skills, improve them, and keep them sharp, they will become dull and lose their effectiveness. It's critical that we realize the importance of sharpening the saw and that we don't let the weeks and years go by without continuous self-renewal and self-examination.

## Increase Production Capacity

Remember Aesop's fable of the

goose that laid the golden eggs? Instead of being patient and waiting for the goose to lay a golden egg every day, the farmer grew impatient and killed the goose, thinking he would strike it rich with a lump of gold in an instant. But the farmer was dismayed to discover there was no lump of gold, and, therefore, he would never get another golden egg. Essentially, the farmer didn't take care of the goose (which represents production capacity), and the golden egg (the production) was eliminated. The moral? Covey says, "If you adopt a pattern of life that focuses on golden eggs and neglects the goose, you will soon be without the asset that produces golden eggs."

When he emphasizes the importance of sharpening the saw, Covey gives an example of a man feverishly trying to cut down a tree with a saw. If he took the time to sharpen the saw, he would be able to cut down the tree in a fraction of the time. When people get busy producing, or "sawing," they rarely take time to reflect because maintenance seldom pays dramatic immediate dividends.

In addition, Covey talks about the circle of influence—when you focus your energy on areas of your life that you can change for the

better. Your circle of influence grows when you build relationships with others and invest in the areas of your life that allow you to make a larger impact. For example, instead of complaining about a coworker, which doesn't improve anything, approach him or her to work out the problem. That will build your relationship with him or her and grow your impact around the office.

## Self-Renewal

As you work toward improving your production capacity and circle of influence, you'll find that sharpening the saw really improves your situation. But keep in mind the definition of insanity often misattributed to Albert Einstein: "Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Sharpening the saw isn't just related to your own skills or knowledge, but it also includes taking the time to improve your relationships, among other things.

When you use the seventh habit, it's critical to take the time to self-examine. This process of self-examination should also include time for renewal. Renewal is the process that enables you to grow and change—to continuously improve. Similar to the "Plan, Do,



Check, Act” cycle of quality improvement efforts, Covey’s cycle of continuous (self) improvement is “Commit, Learn, and Do.” The process of renewal through education, development, and living by your principles will empower you to improve, grow, and maintain a balance between your production and your ability to produce.

Covey breaks down the areas of self-renewal into four categories: physical, mental, spiritual, and social/emotional.

- ◆ You can probably relate to the **physical** renewal your body needs. Exercise is a means of physical renewal that helps clear your mind and strengthen your body. Nutrition, stress management, and rest and relaxation are also elements of caring for your physical body.
- ◆ Most **mental** development and study discipline comes through formal education. But the best way to expand your mind is by reading on a regular basis. Planning and organizing represent other forms of mental renewal associated with habit 2, Begin with the End in Mind, and habit 3, Put First Things First. Training and development activities provided at work also enhance your mental capacity.
- ◆ You can exercise your **spiritual** self through reading, prayer, and meditating. Spiritual renewal is closely aligned with habit 2, Begin with the End in Mind, which is the principle of personal leadership. The spiritual dimension is your core, center, and commitment to your value system. Renewal in this area ensures alignment with what you are doing and

what matters most to you. Outward success will naturally flow from inward success.

- ◆ The **social/emotional** dimension focuses on interpersonal relationships and interaction, while the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions focus on personal renewal. Take time every day to renew relationships and to restore those that may be damaged. Habit 4, Think Win-Win, and habit 5, Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood, are ways to enhance interpersonal relationships. It is through these areas we are also able to significantly expand our circle of influence.

### Continuous Improvement

If you take the time to improve each of these areas of your life, you’ll find yourself on the road of continuous improvement. These basic building blocks produce and enhance the intangible assets that each of us need to be successful. Covey says habit 7, Sharpen the Saw, “involves taking care of your

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assets, resources, and relationships in a way that makes you stronger, wiser, more flexible, more innovative, and more willing to continue learning. Habit 7 keeps all the other habits integrated. It helps you create new realities.”

You may feel like you don’t have time for the things you want to do, but the truth is you have time for the things that are important. One suggestion Covey has for after you decide what’s important to you is to limit watching television and reading the newspaper. This will free up time to accomplish the tasks you’ve set for yourself. Don’t expect miracles all at once; it takes time and energy to develop and discipline your “proactive muscles.”

Growing organizational or personal capacity, improving personal relationships, improving your skills, and maintaining competitive advantage require habit 7. When you neglect any critical area of your business or life, you’ll eventually pay a high price. Habit 7 is the key to continuous improvement as well as developing and maintaining organizational excellence. As Covey wrote, “The only person over whom you have direct and immediate control is yourself. So the greatest assets to constantly develop, preserve and enhance are your own capabilities. And no one can do it for you. You have to do it for yourself. It is the single greatest investment you can make because it leverages everything else.” **SF**

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