



The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

Powerful Lessons in Personal Change

By Stephen R. Covey

15-minute read

Synopsis

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1989) is one of the most celebrated self-help books of all time. This enormously influential guide presents a series of practical principles that will help you succeed in your personal and professional lives.

Who is it for?

- Professionals aspiring to fulfill their potential
- People looking to build stronger relationships
- Anyone seeking to understand a self-help classic

About the author

Stephen Covey was an American businessman, lecturer, and author of bestselling titles such as *The Leader in Me* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which has sold more than 20 million copies. His esteemed career earned him recognition as one of *TIME* Magazine's 25 Most Influential Americans in 1996.

What's in it for me? A compact look at a self-help classic.

A corner office. A loving family. A deep personal sense of accomplishment. We all have goals to which we aspire. But even the best of us can sometimes feel that our aims exceed our grasp. If only there were a way to tap into our hidden potential!

Well, as it turns out, there is. To get the most out of yourself and your life, you just need to develop the right habits. Luckily, these blinks lay out seven simple principles that will help you achieve more. With their insightful advice and instructive anecdotes, you'll learn how to take charge of your routines and cultivate a lifestyle that leads to your own version of success.

In these blinks, you'll find out

- what makes a relationship different from a football game;
- why you should imagine your funeral; and
- how to keep your ax sharp.

In order to succeed, we must cultivate habits aligned with good principles.

Imagine you're visiting a foreign city for the first time. The streets are unfamiliar, and the signs are in a language you don't understand. How will you find your way around? How will you reach your destination?

If you ask a stranger on the street, you may receive a few tips like "Turn right!" or "Take this bus!" And sure – these may help in the short term, but eventually you'll end up lost again. A more effective strategy would be to find a map, right? With an accurate picture of the world around you, you can find your own way, again and again.

Navigating life is similar. While certain small actions can be useful, it's far more valuable to grasp a few fixed and guiding principles and make a habit of following them.

The key message here is: In order to succeed, we must cultivate habits aligned with good principles.

When author Stephen Covey looked back at 200 years of self-help advice, he observed an interesting pattern. He found that most advice given followed one of two paradigms. The first is the *Personality Ethic*. This paradigm argues that success comes from learning a series of tricks and techniques. It says that if you talk the right way or complete the right tasks, you'll achieve your goals. This advice is attractive – but it often leads to rather superficial changes that don't make a fundamental difference.

The second paradigm is different. It's based on the *Character Ethic*. This approach argues that there

are underlying principles to success. These principles aren't specific to any one situation. They're deep, unchanging truths about the world. If we align our inner character with these rules, we'll achieve lasting results.

So how does this paradigm work in practice? Well, let's say you want a happier marriage. The Personality Ethic would tell you to adopt a new communication style or take a certain kind of vacation. In contrast, the Character Ethic encourages you to work on yourself. It says you must become the kind of person who has a good marriage by cultivating a character based on principles like fairness, empathy, and trust.

Of course, this is easier said than done. If you want to develop an inner character based on good principles, then you need to change the way you consistently perceive and approach the world around you. In short, making changes based on the character paradigm requires that you cultivate good habits. Curious to know which habits are essential to this process? We'll cover that in the coming blinks.

Take proactive control of your response to the world.

Here's a simple question that has vexed scientists, philosophers, and everyday people for millennia: What makes you you?

Some argue that it's all about genetics – that human evolution and our very DNA dictate our lives. Others point to our parents. They say that it's who raised us and how we were raised that matter most. Still others insist it's our environment and immediate circumstances that reign supreme.

The truth is, none of these answers is sufficient. They're all too deterministic – that is, they say our lives are at the mercy of outside influences. But highly effective people make a habit of approaching the world in a different way. They realize that while we can't control everything, we can control ourselves.

Here's the key message: Take proactive control of your response to the world.

One of the crucial differences between humans and other animals is our capacity for self-awareness. Animals are largely beholden to external stimuli. When they encounter something in the world, they generally react in a preprogrammed way. In contrast, humans can pause, reflect, and decide how to respond. This is called being proactive, and it's the first habit of highly effective people.

When you're proactive, you have the freedom to choose how to engage with the world around you and the opportunity to determine your own destiny. For instance, you can let unexpected rain ruin your picnic plans. Or you can proactively focus on the positives. Rather than brood about the weather, you can direct

your energy toward enjoying time with your friends, despite the storm.

This works even under the most dire circumstances. Consider the famed psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. He spent World War II locked in a concentration camp. While his tormentors determined all his external conditions, he realized he was still in command of his responses. Rather than lose hope, he spent each day imagining a better future in which he would be able to teach students how he survived the horror. This proactive response gave him the strength to pull through and fueled his later career as an educator.

With practice, you, too, can foster the power to actively shape your response to any given hardship. When you encounter an obstacle at work or in your personal life, take extra care to consider your course of action. Don't immediately succumb to your initial instincts. Instead, step back, consider the root causes of the problem, and then focus your energy on what you can actually influence positively.

Begin every task with a desired outcome.

Let's begin with a slightly morbid mental exercise: Imagine that it's three years in the future, and, sadly enough, you've passed away. Yes, it's a tragedy. But now, all your friends, family, and colleagues have gathered for your funeral. Each person takes turns stepping to the podium and delivering a eulogy. What do you want them to say about you?

Sure, this is tough to think about, but it's also instructive. Suddenly, the unimportant details of daily life melt away, and all your real priorities come into focus. Now you're thinking about your relationships, your accomplishments, and what world you want to leave behind.

As this somber experiment shows, considering your ultimate *outcome* is an essential aspect of organizing your life. That's why highly effective people make a habit of thinking things through – which brings us to our second habit.

The key message here is: Begin every task with a desired outcome.

Whenever you perform an action, whether big or small, you're actually doing it twice. You see, before you physically carry out a process, you must first imagine it by conjuring up a plan. These plans can be quick and casual, like a mental to-do list of your chores, or dense and detailed, like a well-structured business plan.

Either way, it's important to think about the future, as it helps you navigate the present. Think about building your dream house. Before framing the house or putting up the roof, it's wise to draft a blueprint. After all, without a clear picture of what you're building, the construction process will be a chaotic disaster. You'll

make costly mistakes, waste valuable materials, and likely be unhappy with the result.

It's fairly easy to apply this principle to short-term projects. For instance, in the professional sphere, it's always smart to flesh out your weekly schedule ahead of time and have clear goals that you'd like to achieve by the end of each quarter.

However, the real benefits of this habit come when planning for the long term. To do this, imagine your desired life by crafting a personal mission statement. Do some serious introspection and write out what you truly hope to achieve, what values you want to uphold, and what you see as real success. Use this document to measure your progress and as a guide to help you make decisions. When you know your desired destination clearly, it's much easier to stay on the right path.

Put first things first.

It's 9:00 o'clock on Monday morning, and you're at the office. The phone's ringing, the printer's jammed, you have a report to write, and a project plan to draft. And wait – your boss is knocking at your door, wanting to speak to you.

What do you tackle first?

Even when you know what your goals are, it's hard to know which steps to take when. Here to help is the third habit, which is to prioritize tasks according to their urgency and importance.

Here's the key message: Put first things first.

Let's talk about how. There are many approaches to time management. Some favor making lists; others say you should schedule your tasks in advance. But the real secret to working effectively is organizing your efforts by priority – and for this, you can use a time management matrix.

A time management matrix is a grid where you list all your tasks according to two dimensions: urgency and importance. To make one, get a piece of paper, and draw a two-by-two grid with four boxes. The top left box is Quadrant One: tasks that are urgent and important, like a sudden crisis that can't be ignored. The top right box is Quadrant Two: tasks that are important but not urgent – think long-term projects like building client relationships. Bottom left is Quadrant Three: this is for tasks that are urgent but not that crucial, like answering the phone. Finally, bottom right is Quadrant Four: this is for everything that's neither urgent nor important, like playing solitaire.

Once you've divided up all your duties this way, it's easier to see where to focus your efforts. While the items in Quadrant One are important, it's really the jobs in Quadrant Two that deserve special attention. These are often the most overlooked because they don't feel as pressing. However, they're still important, and often

come with the biggest efficiency payoffs. If you address them early on, you'll help prevent new items from appearing in Quadrant One.

Of course, no one can do everything alone. Sometimes putting first things first requires you to delegate items that don't need your personal touch. Just be sure not to micromanage. Don't assign tasks; instead, ask for specific results. After all, when it comes to efficiency, the outcome is what matters most.

Always look for the win-win scenario.

You're at a championship football game. It's the final competition of the season. There can only be one winner and one loser. One team takes home the trophy; the other goes home empty-handed, no matter how well they played.

Luckily, not all areas of life are like this – where one team must triumph and the rest fail. In fact, if you use collaborative thinking, most situations can be mutually beneficial. That's why effective people make use of a fourth habit: ensure everyone has a positive outcome.

The key message here is: Always look for the win-win scenario.

Throughout life, we structure our relationships using certain paradigms that shape how we interact. For many people, the dominant paradigm is a *win-lose* worldview. This means they see every exchange, whether personal, business, or other, as a competition in which getting what you want means the other parties can't get what they want.

While this paradigm is useful in some contexts, it's disastrous in others. It makes everything a competition, turning potential partners into adversaries. This breeds distrust and disharmony – and, eventually, makes both parties losers. For example, imagine a sales team in which only the top-performing person gets a bonus. The rest get nothing. This is a win-lose arrangement that incentivizes each player to care only about himself. People who feel like this may hide leads, or worse, sabotage each other. The result? Fewer overall sales.

There is an alternative to this, and it's the *win-win* paradigm. This worldview ditches competition in favor of collaboration. It seeks outcomes that benefit everyone involved. For that sales team, this could mean giving out bonuses only when everyone reaches individual sales goals. That way, one salesperson's win is also a win for everyone else. This win-win arrangement encourages communication and teamwork, and will result in more sales and happier workers overall.

What's the best way to ensure you're always looking for the win-win? You can adopt an abundance mentality. This mindset doesn't see good things like success, joy, fulfillment, or even profits as rare commodities.

Instead, it knows there's always plenty for everyone. When you realize there's always more value to be had, it's easier to look for ways to collaborate on attaining it.

Build stronger relationships by truly understanding others.

Words are blurry, you're always squinting, and you can't pick out a friend from ten steps away. It's time to visit the optometrist. Now, you know how these trips usually go. You read letters off a chart as the doctor tries out different lenses. Eventually, you find the exact lens for you.

But what if the doctor took a different approach? What if, instead of testing your eyes, she simply gave you her glasses, said, "These worked for me," and left it at that? Well, your vision would still be blurry, and you'd probably find a new optometrist.

It sounds absurd, but when it comes to communication, many people act like that doctor. They offer solutions before actually understanding the problem. Highly effective people take a different approach, with a fifth habit: they listen before they talk.

Here's the key message: Build stronger relationships by truly understanding others.

Good communication is at the heart of any meaningful relationship. Unfortunately, most people only hone their speaking skills – that is, they seek to be understood. However, that's just half the picture. To really cultivate personal connections, you must also understand. And to truly understand someone, you must learn to listen.

Of course, listening means more than simply hearing. It means actually grasping another person's thoughts and feelings on a meaningful level. The best way to do this is by practicing empathetic listening. This form of listening requires you to tune into someone's frame of reference both intellectually and emotionally. It means hearing that person's words, but also uncovering the deeper sentiments behind them.

One way to do this is to hold off on offering advice until you clearly comprehend what someone is trying to communicate. So instead of replying to an anecdote with a story of your own, try identifying the feeling the other person is trying to articulate. This is called "reflecting," and can be as simple as saying, *That sounds frustrating*, or *You feel this is important*. This keeps the conversation centered on the person you want to understand.

Still, this isn't a shortcut or trick. For empathetic listening to work, you must have a sincere interest in other people. It takes time, effort, and practice to do correctly. But if you try it, people will notice and appreciate your attention. In fact, they'll often reciprocate with empathy and respect of their own. Over

time, your relationships will become more open, satisfying, and meaningful.

Create powerful synergy by fostering the open exchange of ideas.

Let's take a walk through the rainforest. It's teeming with life and beauty. What makes this place so vibrant and lush? Is it the birds in the trees? The ants on the ground? Maybe it's the sunlight streaming through the canopy overhead? No, we can't give credit to just one element. Really, these things are all interconnected. It's life's complex web of interactions that allows such ecosystems to emerge and thrive.

In nature and human relations, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. We call this phenomenon *synergy*, and highly effective people are always open to unlocking its potential and implementing this sixth habit.

The key message here is: Create powerful synergy by fostering the open exchange of ideas.

Synergy can be hard to define, but, put most simply, it is the creative force that emerges when different people are brought together in harmony. You see, every person is different, and each individual comes with a set of strengths and weaknesses. So when groups work together, they can actually reinforce each other's positive attributes while mitigating their negatives ones. In the end, a better whole is born.

This can occur in almost any context. For instance, imagine a classroom in which students are empowered to interact and exchange ideas freely. What will happen? Well, some students will ask provocative questions, others will give informative answers, and still others will elevate the discussion with intimate personal insights. In the end, you may stray from the lesson plan, but everyone will learn more.

The way to encourage synergistic energy is to create an environment in which everyone feels safe and respected. This requires drawing on other habits, like win-win thinking and empathetic listening. When these habits are put into practice, people will be more likely to share ideas, build on each other's contributions, and value the different skills brought by others.

It worked for David Lilienthal. When he ran the Atomic Energy Commission in the United States after World War II, he put together a group of highly capable people. Yet, each expert had his own strong opinions that sometimes clashed with others'. So Lilienthal scheduled weeks of group meetings so each team member could share his hopes, fears, and reasons for the program. These open discussions created an atmosphere of trust and understanding that let synergy bloom. In the end, the Commission developed an immensely creative and productive culture.

Make the time to take care of yourself.

Picture yourself as an industrious lumberjack. Every day, you head into the forest to start felling trees. The first few are easy. *Whack, whack, whack*, and down it comes. However, over time, you notice a disturbing pattern. Each tree is taking more chops to bring down. By the end of the week, toppling a single trunk takes all afternoon.

What's gone wrong? It's a simple mistake. While you've been hard at work, you've forgotten to take care of your tools. Your trusty ax, once sleek and sharp, is now dull and useless.

As this parable shows, even the most driven and dedicated workers will eventually burn out if they don't take breaks. For this reason, the seventh and final habit of highly effective people is all about rest and renewal.

This is the key message: Make the time to take care of yourself.

As you strive to achieve your ambitions, it's easy to get so caught up in outward action that you neglect to nurture your own well-being. Of course, this is a dangerous oversight, because without a well-maintained body, mind, and spirit, all your other effective habits will start to suffer. So it's crucial to allocate time and energy to renewing yourself continually in four different dimensions.

The first is the physical dimension. This means taking care of your body with regular exercise, proper nutrition, and plenty of restful sleep. Developing these healthy habits will give you the endurance to keep operating over the long term.

The second dimension is spiritual. Renewing this dimension is all about getting in touch with yourself, your values, and the beauty in the world around you. Each day, take a few moments for quiet contemplation, prayer, or mindful meditation. You'll find such practices keep you centered and ready to handle adversity.

The third dimension is mental. Just like your body, your brain needs regular workouts. Stay sharp by always learning something new. Practice new skills, read new books, or try picking up a foreign language. These hobbies enrich your life and keep you engaged with the world around you.

The fourth and final dimension involves the social and emotional aspects of your life. Pursuing efficiency doesn't mean you have to sacrifice your social life. Just the opposite, in fact – it's crucial to nourish both your personal and professional relationships. Check in regularly with loved ones, chat with colleagues, and play with your children.

If you make a commitment to renew each of these dimensions, you'll continually reap the rewards. With this habit firmly in place, you'll always be ready to act as an effective person.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Self-improvement isn't about memorizing a series of shortcuts and tricks that only work in certain contexts. Instead, the most meaningful way to improve your life and to become more effective is to develop strong habits based on guiding principles. As an effective person, you should:

One. Take proactive control of your response to the world.

Two. Begin every task with a desired outcome.

Three. Prioritize by putting first things first.

Four. Always look for the win-win scenario.

Five. Build stronger relationships by truly understanding others.

Six. Create powerful synergy by fostering the open exchange of ideas.

Number seven. Make sure you take time for yourself.

When you internalize these imperatives and work to cultivate a commitment to them over time, you'll slowly start to reap the rewards of an effective life.

Actionable advice:

Always ascend the upward spiral.

A person's progress is never complete. It's important both to recognize your accomplishments and to make a commitment to continual improvement. Stay aware of your self-improvement journey by tracking your successes. Make a list of qualities you'd like to work on and evaluate your performance week after week. Seeing your success will help keep your spirits high and motivate you to move forward.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *The 8th Habit*, by Stephen Covey

You've just learned seven simple habits that will help put you on the path to success. Next, add one more to your arsenal with *The 8th Habit*.

This sequel to Covey's groundbreaking first book elaborates and expands on his renowned self-help principles. Packed with useful advice, this follow-up explains how improving yourself can also inspire those around you.