

# Habit of a lifetime

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey helped readers uncover their fundamental values. He tells **Michael Costello** why his ideas are even more pertinent in the age of the knowledge worker

Stephen R Covey (pictured) has dedicated his life to demonstrating how every person can reach their maximum potential. He clearly leads by example, having acquired a string of accolades to date. His most famous work, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, has sold more than 20 million copies worldwide, he is recognised as one of *Time* magazine's 25 most influential Americans and ranked second in the 2010 world's top leadership gurus. He's even notched up an International Man of Peace Award as well as a fatherhood award (he is a father of nine, and grandfather of 52), among many other honours and achievements.

Yet originally, Covey was on a very different career track. "I was supposed to go into a family business but, after an experience I had in training and teaching, I told my father I would rather be a teacher." A Mormon, he learnt to speak publicly while serving a mission in England. He spoke in Hyde Park, famous for Speaker's Corner, which taught him how to draw in and keep an audience. In his bid to teach, Covey explored the development of the "character ethic" through individuals managing seven habits (see panel). In this writing, Covey teaches that there are basic principles of living effectively, and that people can only experience true success and happiness when they learn and integrate these principles into their basic character. This is in contrast to the personality ethic approach that

drives human relation techniques and positive mental attitude – a concept propounded by Dale Carnegie, the only author to match Covey's book sales total.

Covey says: "I grew up with Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but I feel it is a little too technique-based. With the seven habits, I was trying to move from the personality ethic to the character ethic, so it's more about the integrity of a person's soul."

So has Covey conquered all of these habits himself? Covey laughs: "Not habit five. My kids sometimes say to me 'I know you're trying to listen, Dad, but I sense your mind is already made up!' And they're right! I can be patronising and not really listen empathically. The more you win on the private victories – successes that are personal and relate to you as an individual – on the first three habits, the less you fall into this trap."

**'Decision-making should be a form of cultural empowerment – where staff are given access to business-critical information'**

In the book, Covey asks the reader to imagine their own funeral as a way of drawing out their fundamental values and decide what is important in life: to "begin with the end in mind". There should be four speakers – a family member, a friend, a work colleague and finally one from your community. What will they say? What difference will you have made to their lives? Asking him about how he sees his own funeral, he says: "My personal vision is to spread principle-centred leadership throughout the entire world, teaching the development of moral authority rather than formal authority. We are at 142 countries right now. Gandhi was the leader of the largest democracy in the world and was also the founder – yet he never held a position of authority."

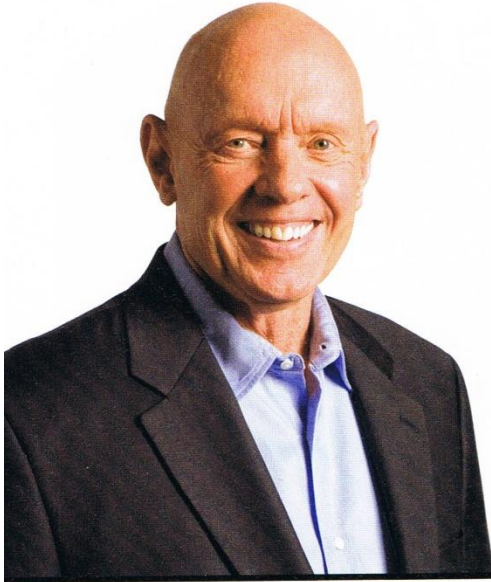
Through his work, Covey suggests we are at the forefront of one of the most exciting times in human history – the movement from the industrial age and formal authority to the knowledge worker age and moral authority. "The industrial age saw the employee as an expense. With moral authority, people have trust between each other and open dialogue... There is now a slow-moving cultural empowerment in the workplace, which taps in to the creative energies of people."

But what exactly does he mean by moral authority? "I recently had a visit from Nelson Mandela. You can see his moral authority. Former US secretary of state Colin Powell said that Mandela's inauguration was one of the most electrifying moments of his whole life. On Mandela's left side were his family and loved ones, and on his right side were his gaolers who had tortured and demeaned him. Yet he bowed to them and said: 'Good morning, gentleman.'

"I asked him, 'How long did it take to get over the bitterness and the demeaning treatment and torture you experienced?' Mandela said, 'About four years – I noticed how they talked to each other and how they talked about each other's families. I came to realise that they were good people who were also victims of the apartheid system'."

How can we develop moral authority? Covey believes we must know ourselves and our values to progress, as well as have "a good and accurate map from where we are starting".

People differ from animals through having "self-awareness and the ability to stand back and examine themselves", he says. "We have the power to create and use our imagination, our conscious and independent will. The more we ask these questions, and tap in to our imagination and consciousness, the more we develop a huge repertoire of responses – we




become amazingly creative. To marry your own voice – what you're good at and what your conscience tells you to do – with the need of an organisation is a good match. This is a knowledge-worker-age concept that people with formal authority have difficulty understanding. Those with formal authority like to make judgments, control and direct."

The recent recession in the UK has posed some unique challenges to business leaders as

working practices and remuneration policies have come under severe attack. "I think businesses should involve their people in the decision-making to work out solutions together. This should be a form of cultural empowerment – where staff are given access to business-critical information. I have faith in the basic wisdom of people and their ability to make decisions... particularly if you involve them over a significant period of time. Unfortunately a great deal of the decisions have been driven by greed and the industrial age command-and-control model."

Solutions should be found through what Covey calls the "third alternative" – collaboratively solving problems, rather than forcing or being forced toward a particular point of view. "You can't achieve a third alternative if you cannot empathically listen to others," he states. "It takes a lot of inward strength and courage to attempt the third alternative." For example, his work with one police organisation on youth crime saw recidivism reduced to only 5 per cent and cost savings of 90 per cent. "Police were providing tickets for people doing good things as opposed to bad things. Business partners would redeem tickets with gifts or a fun activity. It became 'cool to be good' and even cool to turn in bad guys!" Covey recently met with police chiefs in the UK about this scheme, and says he received an enthusiastic response.

It is radical thinking that Covey champions, stressing: "In every field of human endeavour, profession, and discipline, all the breakthroughs are with 'break withs'." 

## ▶ LINKS & NOTES

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### The magnificent seven

#### 1. Be proactive

Realise that your decisions (and how they align with life's principles) are the primary determining factor for effectiveness in your life. Take responsibility for your choices and the subsequent consequences.

#### 2. Begin with the end in mind

Make a conscious effort to visualise who and what you want in life. Begin each day, task or project with a clear vision of your desired direction and destination.

#### 3. Put first things first

Recognise that not doing

everything is okay. Evaluate whether your efforts exemplify your desired character values, propel you towards goals, and enrich your roles and relationships.

#### 4. Think 'win-win'

Genuinely strive for mutually beneficial solutions or agreements in your relationships. Value and respect people by understanding a "win" for all is ultimately the better long-term resolution than if only one person got their way.

#### 5. Seek first to understand

Use empathetic listening to be

genuinely influenced by a person. This compels them to reciprocate the listening.

#### 6. Synergise

Combine the different strengths of people through positive teamwork. In this way, you'll be able to achieve goals that no one person could have done alone.

#### 7. 'Sharpen the saw'

Ensure the balancing and renewal of your physical, social/emotional, mental and spiritual resources to create a sustainable long-term effective lifestyle.