

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People **by Stephen R. Covey**

Simon & Schuster, 1989

Reviewed by David W. Gill www.ethixbiz.com

Stephen Covey's massive best-seller came out in 1989. Twenty years later it still reappears on the best seller lists fairly regularly. What's going on here? *Seven Habits* is a very readable and practical book, for one thing. It is almost surprisingly "thick" in its content --- in no way to be compared to the little best-selling tales and fables that distill down to one or two good ideas. *Seven Habits* is the kind of substantial feast of ideas one can read with profit a second and third time.

I confess that Covey's title turned me off for years: "habits of effective people" I shrugged? How about habits of "ethical people." Hitler and Machiavelli were about "effectiveness." Weapons technology is about effectiveness --- but effective for what purpose?

But my reaction was unfair, as it turns out. Covey's effectiveness is effectiveness in being an authentic human, with good relationships and a meaningful, purposeful life. I still wish he used another term. But since his books sell millions and mine sell thousands I have to yield to his better judgment. (As an aside, Ken Shelton, the editor and publisher of Executive Excellence Publishers, the publisher of my book *It's About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations*), played a big role in Covey's *Seven Habits* project, including editing the first manuscript).

So maybe everyone but me has read *Seven Habits* but just in case. Covey's book is subtitled "Restoring the Character Ethic." It's about developing character, rather than focusing on personality, image, and human relations techniques. Like Aristotle, Covey argues that our character is a composite of our habits. Covey's first three habits concern "private victory" --- achieving "independence" in one's life. First, be proactive. Second, get clear on your purposes and ends and let them guide your actions. Third, get your priorities straight and manage your time and tasks well.

The next three habits (four, five, six) concern "public victory" --- becoming skilled and effective in relational interdependence. The fourth habit is to think win/win about things, rather than win/lose or zero sum. The fifth habit is "seek first to understand, then to be understood." The sixth habit is to "synergize" This is "the essence of principle-centered leadership. . . It catalyzes, unifies, and unleashes the greatest powers within people. All the habits we have covered prepare us to create the miracle of synergy. . . it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (pp. 262-63). It is not just that each of us "wins" but that our victory together is greater than what we could have achieved alone. The final habit concerns self-renewal --- "sharpening the saw" --- making sure you stay sharp, get refreshed and renewed and keep growing all your life.

Every one of Covey's 350 pages has multiple insights and ideas. He has read widely, experienced life and work broadly, and has a real talent for common sense and synthesis of great ideas and insights. He writes well. Only rarely does the going get a bit tedious and you might wish for one less list of this or that. It's not the only way to talk about character (I prefer the Beatitudes and faith/hope/love as my character anchors, cf. my book *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (2000)). But there is a considerable overlap with all the great studies of character. You can't go wrong with Covey's *Seven Habits*. I can think of a few business and political leaders I'd love to have read it carefully.