

Stephen Covey Comes to Middle School: The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teams

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The location: YourTown Middle School YourTown, USA. **The players:** A team of six teachers, representing a variety of content areas, assigned to work with a group of young adolescents in grade 6, 7, or 8. **The scenes and issues:** All take place at team meetings. During the week, the team faces several issues that lead to much discussion and, at times, disagreement. At three team meetings the discussion focuses on ongoing behavior problems the math and language arts teachers are having with a particular student and on several other students who have “deteriorated” academically or behaviorally in most classes over the past four months. One major issue brought up is what some teachers perceive as a lack of administrative support on discipline. Two other team meetings focus on curriculum-related issues: some teachers’ feelings that doing an interdisciplinary unit will “take away” time from their own curriculum and disagreement about what kinds of academic activities the students should do in preparation for, and as follow-up to, the upcoming team field trip to the new science center.

There *are* many teams that function as this team does, and many others that function adequately on a day-to-day basis that could learn to function even more effectively and efficiently. This article will apply Covey’s (1989) “seven habits of highly effective people” to creating middle school teams that are stronger, more “in sync,” and better able to meet the changing needs of today’s young adolescents.

COVEY’S SEVEN HABITS

Covey (1989), a nationally-known expert in the field of personal and organizational leadership development, has identified seven “habits” of people who live their lives to their fullest potential. These habits, Covey says, should be at the core of everything we do, whether personal, professional, social, or spiritual. The habits are based on principles, guidelines for human behavior that have enduring value. To learn to live according to these seven habits, Covey believes, one must first examine one’s own beliefs, paradigms, and motives for behavior. It is what he terms the “inside-out” approach, beginning with one’s inner self, continuously growing and renewing so as to become more responsible and more effective in personal interactions.

Covey’s ideas for personal and interpersonal growth, based on these seven habits, not only apply to individuals, but could also be applied to teams of people working together. How can we transfer these habits into a middle school setting? Let us use the concepts to paint a picture.



THE SEVEN HABITS—CONCEPTS INTO PICTURES

Habit One: Be proactive. When a proactive person is around, things just seem to get done. Proactive people take the initiative and responsibility to make things happen. “Response-ability” is key, Covey explains, in that the proactive person recognizes that what matters most is how we respond to what we experience in life. Choosing our responses to situations results in behavior that is based on our values. Proactive people tend to center more of their time and energy on things that lie in what Covey calls their Circle of Influence (over which they can have control), rather than their Circle of Concern (over which they have no control). At the center of the Circle of Influence lies the proactive person’s ability to make and keep promises and commitments, which, in turn, comes from an inner integrity that gives the proactive person the courage and strength to accept more responsibility for his or her own life.

How does a team as a unit become more proactive? To begin, each team member must have the personal integrity and willingness to accept responsibility for his or her own actions and decisions. That willingness to accept responsibility for its actions with students must then be developed by the team as a unit. For some teachers, this may mean a shift in how they view students’ successes and failures. It means being willing, as a team, to examine their own actions when students’ performance is not what the team wants or expects and being willing to try new approaches that will help students succeed. With that in place, the team members must move to clearly understanding the values of each of the other team members, then blend those values together to develop a set of team values. This forms the basis of what lies behind the actions they take in regard to their students.

The second step in becoming more proactive is for the team to recognize *which* things they have control over, especially within the bigger framework of the school’s operation. For example, there may be certain “givens” in the daily schedule for students, such as five lunch waves between 11:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. or that students move off their core teams twice each day for exploratory or special classes. But within the rest of the day, teams may have much more control over the schedule, being able to establish longer blocks of class time or rotating the time when they meet each of their groups of students, for example. All too often, teams allow themselves to become “stuck” with a pattern (such as five 42-minute class periods a day) because that is the way it has always been done, or they mistakenly believe that state guidelines dictate a practice.

Being protective becomes a true reality and practice when the team moves to actively looking for ways to make things happen by “thinking outside the box.” They look for ways and opportunities to do what others only dream of, because they know this will benefit kids the most. The proactive team may hear someone say that “it can’t be done,” but then shows them how it is done.

Habit Two: Begin with the end in mind. Developing habit two can be one of the most important steps in establishing individual or team effectiveness. “Beginning with the end in mind” means painting a clear picture of where you are going in life, what you want to accomplish. Many people and groups do this through writing a mission or philosophy statement, which is based on the beliefs that are central to them.



How does a team “begin with the end in mind?” They first explore what their students need to know and be able to do by the end of their school year with them. Rather than begin by asking “What is our team vision for our students for this year?” the most effective team first asks “What do our students need in the way of knowledge and skill?” The answer to this question forms the basis for the team’s vision for the school year. From that vision come objectives that state in more concrete terms what they hope for their students to accomplish during the year. This is followed by a plan that outlines what each team member will contribute to meeting those objectives.

For some teachers, providing instruction based first on students’ needs may mean changing the ways they teach or changing the focus of the content. For example, if the team identifies writing skills as a major area of improvement for their students, all of the content areas will focus on strengthening those skills, weaving them into instruction whenever appropriate. In social studies students may do more and different types of writing projects, rather than “construction-oriented” projects; in math, students will more often explain in writing how they arrived at the answer to a problem; in technology education they may focus on writing clear and precise steps they took in constructing a project.

The “end” that the team has in mind may pertain to many areas: content knowledge, skills they will develop that bridge curricular areas, self-discipline and personal growth, parental involvement with their children’s education or social and emotional growth. The “end” is the core of child-centered education at the middle level.

Habit Three: Put first things first. Deciding which things are the truly important things in life is the essence of habit three. This may not be as simple as it sounds, since we often label things as “important” because someone else wants us to get them done. What lies beneath habit three is the ability to identify which things in life are important in the “big picture,” things that truly make a difference in how we live. A couple may decide, for example, that it is more important in the long run for the mother not to return to her office job while the children are still in elementary school. They may decide that being able to devote more time to their children’s needs as they grow is more important than having the second income and the material things it could provide at that time. While the second income is important to the extent that it could buy more things for the children, the couple decides that the mother’s nurturing is far more important in the long run.

Working within this mindset and having a clear understanding of what the most important needs of our students are, what things in the system of schooling we do or do not have control over, and what we can take the responsibility for making happen, we can begin to set priorities. Deciding which things are the truly important things for our students leads us to set goals based on our priorities. We realize that we cannot “do it all” within the confines of our school year or day. Therefore, we choose to focus on those things that have greater importance. In short, we throw out the bath water and keep the baby.

How does a team “put first things first?” This can be rather difficult since we all get caught up in “everyday life” where trivia tries to demand our attention. Effective self-management is needed to keep the team’s attention focused on three important things which help them put first things first: people and relationships, planning, and recognizing new opportunities.



An effective middle school team that focuses on people pays much attention to the affective side of education, recognizing that, in the middle years, student self-awareness is becoming more prominent and self-esteem can be fragile. Teachers take understanding of how adolescents develop into consideration when planning instructional activities and extracurricular programs. The affective aspect of an activity and how it is organized may hold as much importance as the content of the activity itself. In day-to-day interactions in school, an effective team focuses on doing two things: (a) They establish and maintain a positive working relationship among themselves, which becomes evident to other teams, the students, and parents; and (b) they consistently model appropriate behavior for their students, which helps the students learn how to establish effective relationships.

When an effective team plans, they plan as a unit first, keeping the team's goals and objectives in mind. These become the "first things" on which the team focuses. For example, the team will show consistency in classroom behavior rules, they will look for flexibility in scheduling so as to be able to work together to meet students' instructional needs, and they will have a clear understanding of what the other team members teach in the classroom so they can reinforce skills.

Middle school teachers are faced with challenges every day, and an effective team looks at a challenge as an opportunity to grow. They question how new challenges fit and interact with "putting first things first" so that they are able to assign a priority to them. When a blind student, for example, is placed on their team for the year, rather than think first of the extra work it may mean to them, the teachers see this in a positive light. They recognize this as an opportunity for all of them to become more descriptive and detailed in their oral class discussions.

"Putting first things first" for an effective middle school team also means that, because each student has needs as an individual, there may well be times when all students should not have exactly the same thing at the same time. What needs to be "first" for one student might not be needed by another. For example, rather than take the foreign language that is part of the academic core for all students, a student who has real difficulty with language arts might be assigned to work with the reading teacher or in the resource room during that period to receive extra instruction in language arts. When a team puts first things first, diversity and the need to be creative become essential.

Habit Four: Think win/win. In a society that can be as competitive as ours, "thinking win/win" can be difficult. At the core of habit four is the belief that one person's success should not be, and need not be, achieved at the expense of others' success?there is plenty for everyone. People who think "win/win" seek to have all those involved in a situation feel good about the decisions made and committed to following through on the agreed-upon action plan. Being able to practice win/win takes time. It begins with the individual demonstrating character, which Covey describes as integrity, maturity, and the mentality that there is plenty for everyone. This character allows the individual to create relationships where trust is high, which leads to agreement between and among individuals to work for a win/win situation.



How does an effective middle level team think and practice win/win? It begins with individuals bringing a positive attitude that suggests that win/win is important to the team. As a feeling of trust develops, team members become more willing to honestly and openly discuss problems, issues, and ideas. Team members encourage each other to do this, with no open or covert put-downs or gossip that attacks the team member. As the team makes decisions, team members commit to what they know they can follow through on and support one another as they do so.

Teams that think win/win work to create win/win situations among themselves and as they relate to their students, parents, other teams, and school administrators. Working to create win/win situations is different from compromising. In a compromise, all participants give up something they want in order for a solution to be reached. In win/win, the group looks for alternative solutions for a situation, often creating something they had not thought of before that brings gains to everyone.

For the team working from a win/win perspective, the result is a smooth-working, cooperative group. Team teachers and students solve problems together, work through discipline issues together, and generate a classroom environment that values individual differences. Teachers and parents working to create win/win situations for students are more supportive of the child's growth and development, and tend to be less judgmental of how the others carry out their roles. A team that thinks win/win approaches other teams and administrators for ideas and with ideas, breaking down the isolation or sense of competition that can develop in a school. Thinking win/win is hard, but coupled with habits one (be proactive), two (begin with the end in mind), and three (put first things first) lays the groundwork for *what* we must do to become more effective teams; habits five, six, and seven address the *how* of doing this.

Habit Five: Seek first to understand then to be understood. How many times have you been in a conversation where you barely get the words out of your mouth before the other person responds? Or you are trying to explain something of real importance, and you feel the other person is not really listening? Being thoroughly understood is a need we all have at one time or another. The effective middle level team sets understanding the other person as a priority. Covey describes this as going beyond "active" listening to "empathic" listening: trying to get inside the other person's frame of reference by listening for feeling, meaning, and behavior. Empathic listeners convey the feeling that the other party's concerns are of primary importance. They give speakers "psychological air," allowing them to feel they have been clearly understood, and that, as listeners, they feel, not just hear, what the speakers have been saying.

How does a team show that they "seek first to understand, then to be understood?" Many of the techniques are the same as those used in active listening: choose the appropriate tone of voice, use body language that suggests you are open to ideas, establish eye contact with the speaker, sit and do nothing but focus on what is being said, and ask questions that show you are trying to understand what the speaker is saying. The difference with empathic listening lies to the nuances embedded in these techniques which convey more feeling of empathy than does active listening, which can be "mechanical" if one is not careful.



Being effective with middle level students and parents depends greatly on the team's ability, as individual teachers and as a unit, to demonstrate empathic listening. Middle level students are particularly adept at being able to distinguish between those teachers and administrators who are truly empathic and those who are not. To middle level students, being heard is of prime importance. Once they have an opportunity to "tell their story," they are much more receptive to listening to others. What can be taken on the part of the teacher as students being argumentative is really just students' way of saying they want to be heard. When a team chooses to practice empathic listening with students, they can use that conversation as the "jumping off point" for students to begin to analyze their behavior. Empathic listening takes time, which teachers do not always immediately have, but finding time to "seek first to understand" helps build trust between teachers and students that leads to a relationship that will help students to grow more than academically.

Habit Six: Synergize. To synergize means to realize that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To create this whole one must value differences, build on strengths, and compensate for weaknesses. A team that synergizes truly believes that, if they open their minds to new possibilities and new ideas, they will gain more insight and be able to create something that will be significantly better than any one of them could be individually. In short, the team as a unit comes first.

How does an effective middle school team create synergy? They begin by identifying as individuals their differences, strengths, and areas for growth. This takes honest self-reflection, but can be helped along by using any number of professionally-designed instruments to do so (see Gregorc, 1982; Phillips, 1990). Once individual differences are identified, sharing this information with team members is important. This requires a high level of trust among the team members, who must be willing to view another's "weakness" as a "strength that is overdone" (Phillips, 1990). The team can then determine what they can do to compensate for individual weaknesses and use individual strengths most productively. From here the team identifies what they believe to be their strengths and weaknesses as a unit and determines what they need to do to compensate for, and work to decrease, those weaknesses. On a synergistic team, the members are willing to look at the many "shades of gray" of a situation, rather than just one possible "right" way of doing things.

Creating strong synergy on the team leads to improved instruction for students as building on strengths and compensating for weaknesses becomes the focus. Suppose, for example, that the Red Team is planning a field trip to see a new play about a young immigrant girl's experiences when she arrives in New York City to find her sponsor family is not there to meet her at the airport. There are many tasks to be done in preparing for the trip: making arrangements with the theater and for transportation, procuring chaperones (including parents), getting permission slips to and from students, handling the money collected, and planning readiness and follow-up activities for the students in connection with the play. By modeling for the students how to distribute tasks according to what a person does best, the team teachers demonstrate how to value differences, which is important in today's diverse society. The focus moves away from a "me" attitude toward a "we" attitude, leading to greater cooperation among students in both academic and social situations.



Habit Seven: Sharpen the saw. Habit Seven centers around renewing the four basic dimensions of our nature—physical, spiritual, mental, and social/emotional. The physical dimension attends to the care of our bodies; the spiritual focuses on our value systems and what we believe life is all about. The mental dimension of our nature allows us to train our minds to stand apart, be somewhat objective, and examine, from a cognitive standpoint, our situation in life. Our social/emotional being strives for effective interdependent living by providing service to others in a meaningful way or making a contribution to our community.

How does an effective middle school team “sharpen its saw?” Again, by sincerely supporting each other as individuals, and the unit as a whole, which, in turn, provides a role model for students. For example, in the physical realm, team members verbalize and support a healthy lifestyle for each other. They may encourage a member to stay home when ill and help prepare plans for a substitute teacher. On a beautiful day the team may take a brisk walk around the building as they talk and plan or spend an afternoon occasionally playing volleyball or some other sport with another team’s members.

To address their spiritual dimension, the team may, on a periodic basis, discuss what middle school life is all about, how society and students’ needs have changed, or how their roles as teachers have changed. Because the team has synergy, the discussion is focused on what they believe they, as a team, must provide for their students’ growth and development.

To challenge the mental dimension of the team on a periodic basis, team members will closely examine the way in which they do things, asking questions such as: Does the schedule we use provide the most effective instructional time for our kids? How could we use our weekly conferencing groups more effectively? Could we be making stronger interdisciplinary connections for our students? The focus in this type of exercise is what is best for the students, with the team looking for concrete evidence to support its conclusions.

To help renew the social/emotional needs of the team, the members will become involved together in making some contribution to the community and work with their students to help them get involved in doing the same. For example, they may spearhead a fund-raising effort for a local charity or participate with their students in a local organizations’ fund raising Fun Run. Whatever the activity, the focus is on helping the students make connections to the community around them.

Practicing Covey’s seven habits as a middle school team moves the team away from simply being a group of professionals who teach the same core group of students and share planning time toward being a single unit that focuses its energy on continuous self-reflection and growth that will lead to improved instruction for students. The question is, where and how does a team begin?



STAFF DEVELOPMENT TO ACQUIRE “HABITS”

We know more than ever before about how adults learn most effectively. A flexible staff development plan for learning about and how to practice Covey’s seven habits is a necessity. Some ideas for successful staff development might include the following:

Begin with the end in mind. With your team, discuss first what it is you want to know about the seven habits, what your goals are for acquiring this new knowledge, and where you want this to lead you. Talk about the kind of staff development experience you want to have together: a reading/study group of your own; a larger workshop/training series with other middle school teachers, led by a leadership expert; or perhaps a study group that includes a school administrator who plays the role of the team’s coach as they put what they learn into practice. Determine what you will need in the way of resources (time, people, materials, etc.) to get started.

Put first things first. Decide what your priorities are, then prioritize the steps you will take to learn about and practice the seven habits. Does your team need to develop a higher level of trust before the individual members will feel comfortable discussing their personal strengths and weaknesses? Will it be more effective for your team to get a brief overview of the seven habits, then do a preliminary examination of themselves as a team, or will it be more beneficial for your team to examine each habit and the team practices one by one? Making these decisions as a team before you approach staff development will make your learning experience more appropriate and rewarding for everyone. Set realistic timelines for your team, being sure to allow time for the “unexpected” to happen. Try to establish benchmarks for progress that are concrete and observable.

Be proactive. Do not wait for staff development to come to you. Find what you need. Approach your school principal or district staff development coordinator about running a program for teachers who want to learn more about Stephen Covey’s work. Let them know of your interest and what you hope to learn in this area. Draw up a plan for an independent study project centered around the seven habits. Form a reading group (either as part of your district’s professional development program or on your own) that reads and discusses *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Center your discussions around how the habits can be applied to your middle school team.

Think win/win. When planning or participating in your staff development program for the seven habits, keep an essential question in mind: What can I do to foster a win/win situation here? Are there various approaches to learning that I can suggest that would better meet the needs of my team than only one approach? Am I comfortable offering to share my new knowledge with other staff members? If so, how can I do this? What can my team do to help plan and facilitate a professional development program that will meet our needs, while remaining within the district parameters for staff development?

A staff development program centered on the seven habits can never be a prepackaged, “how-to-do-it” prescription for change. It must have flexibility, encourage reflection, and push participants to look at things from a different perspective. It must of necessity challenge team members to question their beliefs, examine their practices, and construct new paradigms. Learners should be encouraged to try out the ideas they encounter, then discuss them with the other members of the group, with the focus being on growth. Learning of this nature often requires participants to “unlearn” some of



the habits they have had for a long time to be able to learn and develop more effective ways of working with others. Because of this, built-in support systems for the group are necessary. The staff development program should be planned as an ongoing experience that takes place over time, not as a “one-shot deal” or a week-long “training” program that crams it all in.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON MIDDLE LEVEL TEAM HABITS

Working with young adolescents is challenging, sometimes frustrating, and always exciting. Sometimes the energy level and unpredictable nature of the students can drive teachers to the edge. Developing team habits such as those described by Stephen Covey can only enhance the middle level experience for both students and teachers. And because they are a special group of students, three more habits are worth developing:

- Build fun for yourself and your students into every day you share; for some of them, school is the only bright spot in their day.
- Celebrate students’ and teams’ successes on a regular basis; for some, school is the only place they feel successful.
- As a teacher and as a team, remember that adolescence is a difficult transition time, and you have got one shot to help them through it successfully. By developing and modeling positive habits for adolescents, a highly effective middle level team will be building highly effective students.

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