

Lessons in personal change; how a book helped me to be an effective leader

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the December 2004 Asian tsunami, as the newly elected Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna, I had to face many challenges. A self-help book, titled “The 7-Habits of Highly Effective People” authored by Dr. Stephen R Covey, had a profound positive effect on my life, empowered me and helped to overcome these challenges. The unique feature of this book is that it advises on character building rather than achieving success as in most self-help books. The 7-habits that are recommended by Dr. Covey are: be proactive; begin with the end in mind; put first things first; think win-win; seek first to understand, and then to be understood; synergize; sharpen the saw. Each habit is discussed, followed by an example of project/activities for which I gave initiative and leadership.

Keywords: *7-habits, character building, effective leadership.*

“I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions.”

- Dr. Stephen R Covey

Background

I was elected as the Dean, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna, on 9 February 2005, just 46 days after the Asian tsunami which devastated Sri Lanka (1). The country lost about 40,000 lives including 10 of our alumni and one student. One seaside student's hostel was washed away by the 20-foot tsunami wave, but we were fortunate not to lose any students from this hostel as they were away on vacation. In addition, several students and staff members had lost their family members, relatives or friends and incurred damages or loss to their properties. Almost all in the medical school were filled with negative emotions and were demotivated.

It was a challenging task to give leadership to a medical school that was mourning and trying to recover from a national disaster and for many a personal disaster. It was hard to get everybody focussed to get on with life. The tsunami had turned around our motivation and morale to a very low ebb.

How self-help book by Dr. Stephen R Covey helped me to overcome the challenges

This book titled “The 7-habits of highly effective people” and written by Dr. Stephen R Covey was first published in 1989 with more than 40 million

copies of it being sold so far (2). In the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami this book helped me to overcome the challenges I faced as a medical school dean. I had the advantage of coming in contact with our clinical (senior) students closely as I met them in the hospital regularly as a clinical teacher. Clinician teachers need to be good role models and problem solvers rather than being critics, and this background helped me to work efficiently and effectively as a dean. As Gallos mentions deans juggle multiple roles and a myriad of expectations from diverse constituents-squeezed from above and below as well as from inside and outside the university, deans are caught in the jaws of conflicting cultures, pressures and priorities (3).

Dr. Covey has given the following three important exemplary recommendations: 1) be a beckon of light and not a judge 2) be a role model and not a critic 3) provide solutions and not create problems.

The 7-habits recommended by Dr. Covey can be considered as time tested truisms and age-old common-sense principles. 7-habits are given in Table 1. Each habit can be interpreted in relation to: 1) immediate post-tsunami period in the country and in particular in our medical school; 2) student culture and staff-student relationships in a medical school.

Habit 1: Being proactive

According to Dr. Covey, being proactive is about taking responsibility for our lives. He says, we don't have to blame circumstances, conditions, or conditioning for our behaviour and we can choose our behaviour.

He goes on to say that proactive people focus their efforts on their circle of influence (Figure 1) and they work on things they can do something about such as their health, family, or problems at work, but if we were to be reactive, we would blame what is around us which is called circle of concern (Figure 1) for our behaviour. He also mentions that proactive persons use proactive language such as "can", "I will", "I prefer" and so on and a reactive person uses reactive language such as "I can't", "I have to", "if only" and so on. Dr. Covey mentions that reactive people believe they are not responsible for what they say and do but proactive people take risks and therefore chances of them making mistakes are higher. However, a calculated risks pay better dividends and enables them to move forward.

Although the medical school had been in existence for 25 years, it had not held a medical exhibition. A few times, plans had been made to conduct a medical exhibition. But it has not materialized due to various reasons given in the circle of concerns (Figure 1). Since most of the staff and students were not motivated, along with a few members of the staff, I initiated moves to hold a medical exhibition for schoolchildren and the public. Under my leadership as the medical school dean, I tried to harness the strengths described in the circle of influence (Figure 1). The medical exhibition was successfully completed in January 2006 as a result of focus and action on what I could control and influence instead of what I couldn't. If anything had gone wrong, as a proactive manager, I should have taken the responsibility without blaming my subordinates (4).

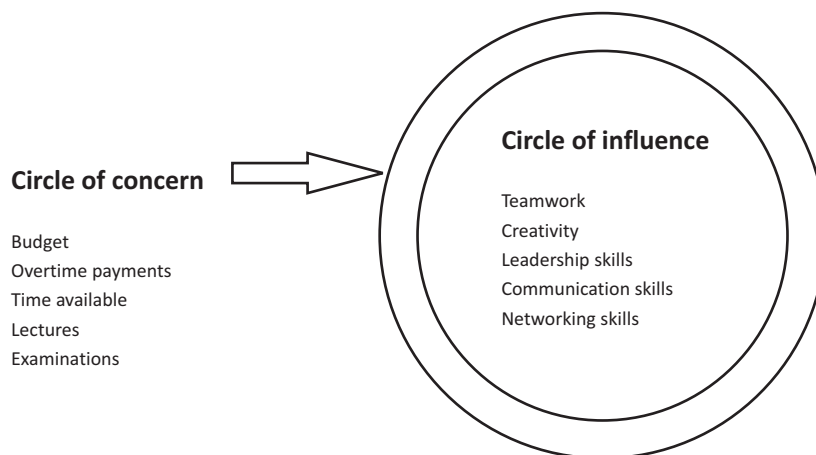


Figure 1: Circles of Concern and Influence (2)

Table 1: The 7-habits of highly effective people (2)

| Habit | Action |
|--|---|
| Be proactive. | Focus and act on what you can control and influence instead of what you can't. |
| Begin with end in mind. | Define clear measures of success and a plan to achieve them. |
| Put first things first. | Prioritize and achieve your most important goals instead of constantly reacting to urgencies. |
| Think win-win. | Collaborate more effectively by building high-trust relationships. |
| Seek first to understand, and then to be understood. | Influence others by developing a deep understanding of their needs and perspectives. |
| Synergize. | Develop innovative solutions that leverage differences and satisfy all key stakeholders. |
| Sharpen the saw. | Increase motivation, energy, and work / life balance by making time for renewing activities. |

Habit 2: Begin with end in mind

Dr. Covey states that habit 2 is “the ability to envision in your mind what you cannot at present see with your eyes by creating mentally (like a blue-print) followed by a physical creation”. He mentions that it focuses on what you want to be and do and move your ideas into the real world.

Due to the overwhelming response from the public to the medical exhibition, we were motivated to set up a permanent in-house facility to educate schoolchildren and the public in health-related matters which we named as the Medical Exhibition Centre (MEC). It was specially designed to cater to the General Certificate of Education Ordinary as well as Advanced Level students in the field of Bioscience. Preparation of the MEC required meticulous planning, resources and good craftsmanship. We followed the philosophy in habit-2. The MEC, which was first of its kind in the country, opened to the public in May 2009 as a culmination of good planning and concerted efforts.

Habit 3: Put first things first

Dr. Covey mentions that we spend our time in one of four ways, depending on the two factors which define the activity, urgent and important (Table 2).

Urgent means it requires immediate attention. Urgent things act on us and are usually visible such as a ringing phone. Important things on the other hand have to do with results. It contributes to our mission, values and high priority goals. We react to urgent matters. Important matters that are not urgent require more initiative and more proactivity.

Having read Dr. Covey's book, I decided to concentrate on “Effectiveness” and “Planning”. Inevitably, I had to make some trade-offs. This included curtailing hospital ward rounds, clinics and being “on-call”, thereby reducing time spent on quadrant 1 activities and thus making more time available for quadrant 2 activities. I could do this without sacrificing standards of patient care because I had several qualified and competent colleagues to take over my clinical work. It was not possible for me, as a clinician dean, to invest more time on quadrant 2 activities without curtailing clinical work.

Further, a simple step released lot of time from quadrant 3 and made it available for quadrant 2 activities. Although the dean had a secretary from the inception of the school, for 25 years the Dean's telephone didn't have an extension to the secretary. Therefore, the secretary had to rush from the

adjoining room to pick up telephone calls or the dean had to take it. As calls often interrupted my work, I had an extension installed to the secretary’s room, and thus was able to prioritize and achieve my most important goals instead of constantly reacting to emergencies.

Habit 4: Think win-win

Dr. Covey states that “most of us learn to base our self-worth on comparisons or competition and we think about succeeding in terms of someone else failing: if I win, you lose; or if you win, I lose.” According to him, people tend to think that only a limited amount of pie is available to go around, and if one gets a big piece, there is less for the others: “it’s not fair, and I’m going to make sure you don’t get anymore”. He states: “win-win sees life as a cooperative arena, not a competitive one; win-win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefits in all human interactions; win-win means agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial and satisfying.” He goes on to state: “to go for win-win, you not only have to be empathic, but you also have to be confident, you not only have to be considerate and sensitive, but you also have to be brave.”

Few weeks after I assumed the position of dean, Duke University Global Health Centre contacted me to discuss ways of helping our medical school as they knew that we were affected by a tsunami. When I inquired from few of our faculty members to find out as to what I should request from the Duke University, they suggested requesting for equipment. After a long meeting with several faculty members of Duke University, they did not agree to give any equipment. Instead, they were happy to start a link program with our medical school focusing on collaborative research and for us to be preceptors for their residents. When I conveyed this information to our faculty, the response was initially lukewarm. However, I managed to convince the faculty indicating the long-term benefits like capacity building in research and publications, so that we could collaborate effectively by building high-trust relationships. The Duke-Ruhuna link program commenced in 2006 and continues to grow from strength to strength.

Table 2: Factors Which Define Priority of an Activity (2)

| | URGENT | NOT URGENT |
|----------------------|--|--|
| IMPORTANT | <p>Quadrant 1. Necessity Medical emergencies Crises Timelines Unforeseen events</p> <p>Strategy: DO</p> | <p>Quadrant 2. Effectiveness Proactive work Important goals Creative thinking/research Planning Relationship building Learning (Continuous Professional Development) Recreation</p> <p>Strategy: PLAN</p> |
| NOT IMPORTANT | <p>Quadrant 3. Distraction Unimportant phone calls, text messages, emails Needless interruptions Other peoples’ minor issues</p> <p>Strategy: DELEGATE</p> | <p>Quadrant 4. Waste Gossip Television Aimless browsing the Internet Excessive relaxation</p> <p>Strategy: ELIMINATE</p> |

Habit 5: Seek first to understand, and then to be understood

Communication is a very important skill. Dr. Covey states: “you spend years learning how to read, write, and speak. But what about listening? What training have you had that enables you to listen so that you really, deeply understand another human being?” He states: “if you’re like most people, you probably seek first to be understood; you want to get your point across. In doing so, you may ignore the other person completely, pretend that you’re listening, selectively hear only certain parts of the conversation or attentively focus on only the words being said, but miss the meaning entirely. So why does this happen? Because most people listen with the intent to reply, not to understand”. Dr. Covey goes on to state: “you listen to yourself as you prepare in your mind what you are going to say, the questions you are going to ask and filter everything you hear through your life experiences, your frame of reference, which makes you decide prematurely what the other person means before they finish communicating”.

Members of the Medical Students’ Union (MSU) had the habit of randomly visiting the dean’s office, as and when they wished to, to address their grievances, even for issues that were non urgent. As a medical teacher since 1982, I was accustomed to speaking to students and transferring knowledge and skills. However, when I became the Dean about 17 years later, I had to change my style of communication and be a better listener. I met with students on appointment so that I could give them more time and try to get to the root of their problems. I felt that if I had allowed them to walk into my office as and when they had a complaint, I may not have sufficient time for a discussion with them and I may have delegated the matter to someone else like the faculty proctor or a student counsellor. I feel that this developed mutual trust between the students and myself, and helped us to successfully implement some major projects such as the medical exhibition, medical exhibition centre, and students’ cultural show. As Larssona and Vinberg mentions, for good leadership, communication and trust are keywords; there is mutual confidence between leaders and subordinates and everybody relies on each other (5).

Habit 6: Synergize

According to Dr. Covey, synergy means “two heads are better than one” and to synergize means creative cooperation, teamwork, open-mindedness, and the adventure of finding new solutions to old problems. He also states that it doesn't happen on its own as It's a process, and through that process, people bring all their personal experience and expertise to the table together, producing far better results than what they could have obtained individually. Dr. Covey explains that the “whole is greater than the sum of the parts” and synergy lets us discover jointly things we are much less likely to discover by ourselves. Accordingly, one plus one is more than two when people genuinely begin to interact with each other, and they are open to each other’s influence and they begin to gain new insights and the capability of developing new approaches, which increase exponentially because of differences. As West and *et al* mentions for teams to function effectively there should be constructive debate, openness to and exploration of opposing opinions, concern for quality and innovation, tolerance of diversity and concern for the integration of ideas (6).

Few weeks after I assumed duties as the dean, I received a call from an official of the Government of Victoria expressing their willingness to fund an Emergency Trauma Centre (ETC) for the Teaching Hospital, Galle. During the conversation the caller mentioned that there was a breakdown in communication when they wanted to discuss the matter with the hospital administrators. The following week they visited my office and we had our first meeting with them which was attended by the director of the hospital and a few specialists from the hospital. After the Ministry of Health gave the nod, the project went ahead.

The ETC was opened to the public in 2011, and it is now served by more than half a dozen specialists and over 30 doctors. It is the busiest part of the hospital and serves as a training centre for emergency physicians. I played the pleasant role of being the convenor of the steering committee and the co-chairman of the capacity building committee. It was an enriching experience where all of us worked as an efficient and effective team in synergy. During the project we developed

innovative solutions when we were faced with problems and managed to leverage differences and satisfy all the key stakeholders. We learned from each other, shared our experience and expertise which helped us to deliver a quality product.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

Sharpen the saw means preserving and enhancing the greatest asset one has and it is oneself. It means having a balanced program for self-renewal in the four areas of life: physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual. Dr. Covey states: “you can pamper yourself mentally and spiritually or you can go through life oblivious to your well-being; you can experience vibrant energy or you can procrastinate and miss out on the benefits of good health and exercise; you can revitalize yourself and face a new day in peace and harmony or you can wake up in the morning full of apathy”. Every day provides a new opportunity for renewal, a new opportunity to recharge oneself instead of hitting the wall or from getting burnout. All it takes is the desire, knowledge, and skill. I adopted most of these inspiring recommendations which were quadrant 2 activities (Table 2) and it helped me to sustain zest in my life all the way.

Discussion

The ability to serve as an effective leader of a medical school is challenging today, as they have an increased set of responsibilities and expanded roles because of economic pressures, political turmoil, student trade union actions and regulatory changes (7). When clinicians become deans, they may find themselves working against their natural, altruistic traits, and instead learn ways to be tougher and more single-minded about delivering change (8). Latter two statements were very much applicable to me. By developing habits 1 - 3, I became more independent and by developing habits 4 - 6, I became more interdependent. These are qualities that should be possessed by any leader and it helped me very much when I adopted these recommendations to execute my duties as the dean of a medical school both individually as well as a leader of a team. The book gives real life examples which acted as an interphase to understand the principles which were

timeless. It helped me to strengthen my character as it was addressing character building rather than achieving success as dealt by other self-help books.

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