The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People programme:

A follow up study.

Ray Murray and Patricia O'Brien

Centre for Special Education

Auckland College of Education

*Paper presented at the AARE-NZARE Conference*

29 November - 2 December, 1999, Melbourne, Australia.

*The Research Executive Committee, Auckland College of Education, is acknowledged for funding associated with this project.*

**Introduction**

Covey's work on leadership has been influential in distinguishing what are the habits that underlie principle centred leadership (Covey, 1990a; 1990b; Covey, Merrill and Merrill, 1994). Covey believes that leaders operate on four levels: the personal (relationship with self); interpersonal (relationships and interactions with others); managerial (responsibility to get a job done with others); and organisational (aligning actions and strategies with the values embraced by the organisation). The relationship between Covey's levels of management and what he has described as the seven habits of highly effective people are well described by Espiner, Murray and O'Brien (1997) who have incorporated the teaching of the 7 habits within an applied degree for human services workers. Within the personal level Covey aligns the three habits of *Being proactive* (Habit 1) which relates to the clarification of personal values; *Begin with the end in mind* (Habit 2) which stresses the need for vision and mission; and that of *Put first things first* (Habit 3) which relates to effective time management. Within the interpersonal level, *Seeking first to understand, then to be understood* (Habit 5) is aimed at improved communication where both parties have a greater influence over one another through being open to the other person's opinion. Moving to the managerial level *Think Win-Win* (Habit 4) is seen as a means of discussing an outcome until both parties can agree on a solution. Within this level Covey has described *Synergise* (Habit 6) which emphasises what can be achieved when people work co-operatively outweighing what is possible on an individual basis which can sometimes lead to a third alternative. At the next level of management, the organisational, Covey stresses the need to align the structures, systems and strategies used within the management with its principles, philosophy and vision. At all four stages he stresses the need for *Sharpening the Saw* (Habit 7), which relates to renewal in one or more of the areas of the physical, social- emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Within the current managerial literature (Senge, 1990; Spears, 1995) Covey's work is recognised and critiqued as a leadership model but little has been written to show its potential within educational settings.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Covey, 1990a; 1990b) have been taught within courses on leadership offered within the Centre for Special Education since one of the staff became accredited by the Covey Leadership Centre (now Franklin Covey) to teach the Covey material within the Auckland College of Education site. Three years ago Franklin Covey gave permission to the Centre for Special Education to offer the teaching of the
package on the 7 Habits to educators in the public domain. Three courses have been run mainly for senior staff from school based settings. The aim of the study was to follow up on the outcomes of the course identifying the overall impact that the content had had on the participants both professionally and personally.

Design and Methodology

Over the last three years, three Seven Habits courses have been run for senior educators through the Centre for Special Education in conjunction with Franklin Covey. A letter of invitation was sent to all 75 members who completed the three, four day courses inviting them to attend a focus group to follow up on how the 7 Habits programme has effected them both personally and professionally. Three options of dates were given and only five people accepted the invitation to attend; 10 sent apologies indicating that work pressure worked against their availability and three offered to become involved but could not attend the focus groups. For two participants this related to living 100 ks out of Auckland and for the third person the timing of the focus groups clashed with commitments out of Auckland.

Although the response rate was low it was decided to run the two focus groups, one with two participants and a second with three. The rationale for this was that with such a small response rate it was important to check even with a small group what were the outcomes of the course. If the course proved to be of little value it could explain why the response to participate in the project was low. If not then revising the recruitment strategies for participants in a follow up request could be worthwhile. As part of the original methodology a volunteer was to be called from each of the three focus groups to participate in the development of a profile where they would be individually interviewed, asked to keep a diary on how they implemented the 7 habits as well as ask for a peer review statement on how the 7 habits course had effected them. On realising that the response to the focus groups was low and that there were three people who had volunteered to give feedback outside of the focus groups which they could not attend each of these people were approached to be the subject of a profile study. All three agreed but in this paper only the data associated with the interviews of two of the participants is presented. Although a third person was interviewed the tape could not be transcribed owing to technical difficulties. A date for a follow up interview has been set.

Focus group and profile participants participants

All five participants who attended the focus groups held senior management positions, for four they were in school based settings while for a fifth the management role was within a community based organisation. Four of the participants were women and one was male. For the four school based personnel one was a principal while the other three were senior teachers. In focus group one there were two participants, one male and one female who were respectively involved in a community based and school based settings. In the focus group two all three female participants were senior teachers. All of the five participants had done the course in the last 18 months to two year time period.

In terms of the two people whose profile interviews are reported in this paper both were female. Both held senior positions with educational support services.

Interview questions

The interview schedule that was administered as part of the focus groups consisted of five questions that covered: the extent participants had been able to practice what they had learned on the course; how the programme had impacted upon their professional and
personal lives and specifically what had been the effect upon their lives in relation to each of the seven habits.

The interview questions that were asked of the two profile participants were exactly the same with the addition of two other questions that centred around whether there had been any barriers or difficulties for the person in aligning the principles espoused in the seven habits to their professional and personal lives.

The focus group interviews took place at Auckland College of Education and each group ran for approximately 45 minutes. A similar length of time was taken to administer the individual profile interviews. One was done by phone and the other face to face. Prior to the start of the focus groups and the profile interviews consent forms were signed where the participants gave permission to have their interviews tape recorded. Details of the purpose of the project and what was expected of them had been outlined in an information sheet sent to each participant when invited to participate.

Analysis of the data

In terms of analysis the transcripts of the two individual interviews were content analysed and both common and individual themes identified. Similarly the focus group transcripts were content analysed and then the themes identified in the individual interviews were compared and contrasted against them.

Findings

The findings are presented under each of the questions asked. Where the question related directly to one of the 7 Habits a definition of the habit precedes the findings. Following the description, quotes from the transcribed tapes that reflect the essence of the responses to the question are given.

What people have practised since the 7 Habits Programme

*The course had such an impact for me on perhaps affirming some things I felt good about but also challenging me to do things better.*

*Use the diary all the time and I fill in my weekly goals ... that helps to focus on the bigger picture of your relationship with different people and the job ... so I find that each week, I seem to fulfil all those little goals and it made me a much happier person.*

From the responses of the two profile participants a common theme was that the Covey programme had affirmed what they already knew. One of the participants used the Covey Organiser (Diary) indicating that it kept the big picture in mind. Use of the diary was verified by two of the participants in Focus Group 2. Other indicators that members of the focus groups had embraced the programme were: focusing on the bigger picture, reflecting on the content of video tapes, as well as indicating that it was easier to implement what they had learned at home rather than at work.

Impact on professional life

*It's forward planning ... but it's also what are the important issues and what aren't. What's the trivia that you can actually put away and what will make the most difference to us and also to the people you work with.*
I brought more staff on board ... we work together ... working in a trusting relationship, we develop a lot of trust.

In terms of how the 7 Habits programme had impacted upon the profile participants one participant stressed that it had lead to the development of more trusting relationships as well as emphasising for her the need to step back from the minutia of the daily routine to take time out to look at the bigger picture. In effect she felt that she had become more organised and more in control as a result of the programme. Although the second participant did not stress the development of trusting relationships her comments did indicate that she was endeavouring to interface more closely with staff through using a system of reflection to seek to understand how they were feeling about situations as well as brainstorming together to use their ideas. At the same time this participant recognised that she now prioritised better. The focus group findings reflected the responses of the profile participants in that both groups stressed how they were now using more forward planning in their professional lives. For one participant this was also related to identifying the important issues as opposed to the trivia.

Impact upon personal lives

I don't feel guilty about taking time to do things for myself.

Making time to develop a new relationship ... is a definite spin off from the 7 habits... quality time for particular roles that I've chosen now that I purposely set out to choose.

In terms of impact on their personal lives both of the profile participants identified how it related to making long term plans and prioritising personal goals. Taking time out was also shared as an outcome. For one person this was expressed as not feeling guilty taking time out for herself and for the other participant it was making time to keep in touch with friends. The focus groups responses verified that personally the 7 Habits programme had had impact on assisting people to recharge their batteries and spending time with significant people as well as putting time aside to develop the specific roles that the person had identified for themselves.

Habit 1: Be proactive

Covey defines this habit as:

Being proactive is more than taking initiative. It is accepting responsibility for our own behaviour (past, present, and future) and making choices based on principles and values rather than on moods or circumstances. Proactive people are agents of change and choose not to be victims, to be reactive or to blame others. They do this by developing and using four unique human gifts - self-awareness, conscience, imagination, and independent will - and by taking an Inside-Out Approach to creating change. They resolve to be the creative force in their own lives, which is the most fundamental decision anyone ever makes (Covey, 1999, end papers).

Professionally

So if you want to change, you've got to do it

I'm making what I do based on my beliefs and my values
For one of the profile participants responding positively to peoples' requests in the work place was considered to be proactive while for the other participant being proactive related to the use of "I" statements and letting people know her values.

The focus group participants verified proactivity as working positively with staff which was expressed in the following ways: giving staff more information about issues; communicating with staff; encouraging others who come up with ideas and choosing how to respond and not reacting.

**Personally**

*Sort through the facts first.*

*Why not just get on and do it.*

Taking responsibility for their own life and the changes in it was seen as being proactive by one of the participants. They now saw themselves as part of the solution. For the other participant the focus related to sorting out values and reflecting upon them. Being more in touch with one's values assisted the person to reflect, which had led to her being less open to her moods.

The overall theme of the focus group comments indicated that being proactive in one's personal life meant that one stepped back instead of reacting or as described by one member having a paradigm shift that led them to react differently. Put succinctly the theme could be summed up as "being proactive not reactive".

**Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind**

Covey defines this habit as:

> All things are created twice - first mentally, second physically. Individuals, families, teams, and organisations shape their own future by creating a mental vision and purpose for any project. They don't just live day to day without a clear purpose in mind. They mentally identify and commit themselves to the principles, values, relationships, and purposes that matter most to them. A mission statement is the highest form of mental creation for an individual, a family, or an organisation. It is the primary decision because it governs all other decisions. Creating a culture behind a shared mission, vision and values is the essence of leadership (Covey, 1999, end papers).

**Professionally**

*I'd inherited a vision that other people had for the service and I lived with that because I felt some alignment with that but I needed to revisit it and I rewrote the mission statement and value statement for the service (one teacher service) for the annual report. I don't think that it is markedly different from what it was already. It's just that I own it.*

*Doing the things that I say I'm going to do, not just procrastinating.*

Development of a mission statement within the work place was stressed by one of the participants and this was reinforced by the other who indicated that she set goals in a written
form in order to achieve. It was important for this person to act in a way that reflected fair, considerate values which she hoped she would be remembered for professionally.

The setting of a mission and goals was verified by the focus group discussions, both groups stressed articulating the vision and mission within the workplace. Such developments had the benefits of: knowing where the staff involved wanted to "get to"; working as a team as a result of setting the goals together.

**Personally**

_ I also shared it (personal mission statement) and that's been powerful with my partner._

_If you know where you're going it's hell of a lot easier to get there rather than wandering around and finding it by mistake._

The setting of goals professionally had affected the personal lives of the profile participants. Both the profile participants indicated respectively that they had clarified a common vision with their partners and that they now set goals and prioritised them in their personal lives. Similarly within the focus group discussions planning for where the participants wished to go was important and in one situation this had meant showing one's partner their own personal mission statement.

**Habit 3: Put first things first**

Covey defines this habit as:

_Putting first things first is the second or physical creation. It is organising and executing around the mental creation (your purpose, vision, values, and most important priorities). Second things do not come first. First things do not come second. Individuals and organisations focus on what matters most, urgent or not. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing (Covey, 1999, end papers)._**

**Professionally**

_ I believe that has certainly helped me in terms of stress and time management because I have endeavoured in both of those areas of my life to write things down so that I'm not having to store them in my head where they go round and round and round and I think, “Oh what was that I was supposed to do?”_  

_ I try to make sure that's why we're there, our core business is why we're there, that we're not going off on some tangent or try to do too much. Yeah often we have lots and lots of ideas, especially primary classroom teachers and you really have to cut out all the stuff that's not actually going to achieve what you're want to achieve._

For both the profile participants this led to organised planning. For one participant it meant putting energy into planning the week ahead on Monday mornings using the roles and goals as laid out in the Covey diary (organiser). She described also how she assisted students to plan by working with them to identify the key issues through focusing on the big picture. For
the other participant writing things down and prioritising had reduced stress in her management position.

Similarly the focus group discussion indicated that participants were more organised through using the diary; allocating time to plan uninterrupted and eliminating tasks that got in the way of achievement.

**Personally**

*It's sometimes much harder to do I think on a personal level because you get tangled up with other things ... however it's something that you constantly have to work on.*

*Putting first things first personally has meant that kind of what I want to do gets submerged underneath what I think I should do for my family. I make sure I contact my family weekly. I don't want to lose contact with my brother and sister. I've realised they are actually important to my life*

Putting first things first personally for one of the profile participants meant working not to lose contact with the family. She had worked to ensure that her relationships with family members was as important as that of work. Similarly she had balanced the profile of her recreational pursuits with her work commitments. The second participant made no specific comment on the personal impact of Habit 3.

Within the focus group discussions emphasis was placed on personal priorities as a means of finishing set jobs, such as, home renovations; allowing time for what is personally important in a busy 7 am to 7 pm lifestyle; as well as “shelving” those tasks that are not important.

**Habit 4: Think win-win**

Covey defines this habit as:

*Thinking win-win is a frame of mind and heart that seeks mutual benefit and is based on mutual respect in all interactions. It's about thinking in terms of abundance - an ever-expanding "pie," a cornucopia of opportunity, wealth, and resources - rather than of scarcity and adversarial competition. It's not thinking selfishly (win-lose) or like a martyr (lose-win). In our work and family life, members think interdependently - in terms of "we," not "me." Think win-win encourages conflict resolution and helps individuals seek mutually beneficial solutions. It's sharing information, power, recognition, and rewards (Covey, 1999, end papers).*

**Professionally**

*I think it's quite hard to think of it ourselves ... to turn the situation into think win-win. And it takes a lot of practise and I just communicate clearly to be able to do that. I think it's quite hard.*

*If someone's out there just to fight for the sake of it, then I think ... it 's very hard to have a win-win because they are after a win lose. So it's probably*
where I am doing most of my work at the moment or should be doing most of my work.

Both of the profile participants reported that embracing, "Think winwin" enabled them to strengthen staff relationships. For one participant it meant identifying the staff strengths and working from them, for the other it meant working in a way with staff that staff felt comfortable with.

This theme of working to mutual satisfaction was verified in one of the focus groups as a means of resolving conflict and also as a way to let staff and parents have an influence over specific outcomes. Where both groups agreed, however, was that it was time consuming and needed clear communication. Both groups indicated that it didn't always work and was sometimes sabotaged by people wanting a win-lose or undermined by a power struggle.

**Personally**

*Think win-win works at home*

I think in the decisions that have to be made in a partnership or relationship often it's a win lose situation...and I think looking to find the other ways out or the third alternative is really important.

Think win-win at a personal level had led one of the profile participants to move from solving peoples' problems to providing support for them to solve their own. Similarly for the other participant she now listened to friends rather than giving them advice. She described how she worked now to show friends that she really wanted to listen and understand them.

Focus group discussion also centred around talking through issues more with partners and working to a third alternative in trying to resolve conflict rather than compromise. Sharing household responsibilities was also mentioned as an outcome from utilising a win-win strategy.

**Habit 5: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.**

Covey defines this habit as:

> When we listen with the intent to understand others, rather than with the intent to reply, we begin true communication and relationship building. When others feel understood first, they feel affirmed and valued, defences are lowered, and opportunities to speak openly and to be understood come much more naturally and easily. Seeking to understand takes kindness; seeking to be understood takes courage. Effectiveness lies in balancing the two (Covey, 1999, end papers).

**Professionally**

> When you seek first to understand is sort of re-iterating what the person has said ... it takes a lot of that - you keep working at it.

> It made me sit back and think, look, people don't need to hear the way I feel first
The theme that arose for both of the profile participants was that they now elicited information through listening rather than giving advice. For one of the participants she felt that this enabled her to be more constructive in the work place rather than just "bandaidding situations".

Within the focus groups the need to listen and reiterate and rephrase were the major considerations. How this had effected people ranged across: reversing trying to get people to understand to trying to understand people; not pushing so hard to get people to understand by starting with the premise of first seeking to understand. The issue was raised, however, that it was not always easy to rephrase authentically rather what can happen is that what is rephrased is not what people had said, but what people wanted to hear.

Personally

And I just helped him by being there and listening and not doing any kind of judgement stuff like my father and sister had done.

We didn't judge

I think I react before I stop to find out what's going on and for me that's been a really hard one to keep practising ... what is the person actually meaning when they said that rather than taking it at face value ... reacting to it.

Both of the profile participants saw that this habit had led to change which covered such qualities as becoming non-judgmental; a listener and a support person.

Change for the focus group participants was also evident covering better communication and rapport with partner and family members as well now working to find out what was really wrong rather than saying "don't mind". Reacting had been replaced by questioning. For one of the participants the family relationships had been enhanced by their partner also reading the Covey material which enable them to use the same language, such as, "Let's go for a win-win".

Habit 6: Synergise

Covey defines this habit as:

Synergy is about producing a third alternative - not my way, not your way, but a third way that is better than either of us would come up with individually. It's the fruit of mutual respect - of understanding and even celebrating one another's differences in solving problems, seizing opportunities. Synergistic teams and families thrive on individual strengths so that the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Such relationships and teams renounce defensive adversarialism (1+1=1/2). They don't settle on compromise (1+1=11/2) or merely cooperation (1+1=2). They go for creative cooperation (1+1=3 or more) (Covey, 1999, end papers).
Professionally

I have one staff member who just says, "oh let's synergise and she really gets into it and she will actively seek that path ... she will create that even if it's not there.

I think it's quite amazing to see what you can come up with when you do think there's another way and when you can be creative and work together on it.

Both of the profile participants saw this habit as centring around team work with one person believing that synergy did not stand alone as a habit and once win-win and seeking to understand was practised synergy followed. For the other participant synergy also related to brainstorming with other people and she stressed that it made her think outside the square.

Focus group discussion on synergy centred around team work, the benefits of which covered: 1+1=5+ and providing the quieter people with an opportunity to have a say. Two specific examples were given as arising directly from the completion of the course. Members of the management of a school who attended the same course took the idea of synergy back to their school, introduced it to the broader management team who, following its practise, introduced it to the syndicate teams. As a result it was considered that individuals felt more valued and appreciated as well as less judged. In another situation a meeting structure had been introduced to give the quieter people an opportunity to have a say.

Personally

I feel the end result is far more satisfying than feeling perhaps it's coming purely from a viewpoint of my own which may purely be based on the knowledge that I have.

I think for me it's that team thing again. When my wife and I operate as a team we certainly get a lot achieved. When we are operating individually we may actually be compromising each other.

Synergy for one of the profile participants meant sitting down and visualising the problem while for the other at a personal level it meant the valuing of people's opinions, ideas and thoughts.

The personal benefits of teaming within the family and with one's partner were stressed. For one of the participants it had benefits in helping to blend a new family together where the members talked about their roles and what they wanted to achieve. For another participant life was less of a compromise and struggle as a result of operating within the family as a team. Teaming at a personal level was not without its problems and it was mentioned that agreeing to differ and move on could, on some occasions, be calming.

Habit 7: Sharpening the saw.

Covey defines this habit as:

Sharpening the saw is about constantly renewing ourselves in the four basic areas of live: physical, social-emotional, mental, and spiritual. It's the Habit that increases our capacity to live all other habits of
effectiveness. For an organisation, Habit 7 promotes vision, renewal, continuous improvement, safeguards against burnout and entropy, and puts the organisation on a new upward growth path. For a family, it increases effectiveness through regular personal and family activities such as establishing traditions that nurture the spirit of family renewal (Covey, 1999, end papers).

I become aware of life balance and the fact that I needed to make time for me and to do things on my own as well as together with my husband ... so that I would remain a sane person because in fact if I didn't everybody else would suffer.

Some of the things I do I wouldn't have done in the previous relationship ... I actually make a point of doing social type things or physical things or spiritual things with that person now.

I have a wonderful home and a wonderful environment and I really value the bush, the lovely view ... that's emotionally and spiritually relaxing and re-energising and I've tried to really appreciate that more, the bird life, the everything else that makes me feel good.

If you are going to stay well what are things you are going to need to look at, diet, water, food, exercise and sleep. I push the message with the students.

Sharpening the saw for one person was seen as the need to balance lifestyle while for the other it was having time out to re-focus. This message one of the participants passed onto her students. Both participants talked about nature as a means of refocussing their spirituality.

Within the focus group discussions the idea of sharpening the saw as having time out for oneself was verified. This was well expressed by one participant who saw it as things you do for yourself to look after yourself in the rhythm of the school week. Nevertheless it appeared that this habit may be the first to go under the stress of work commitments. It was also mentioned that where family members may have initially resisted the participants claiming time for themselves acceptance has been achieved with one family member now claiming the same to attend to their well being. It was considered important to remind oneself that as a person one is as important as the other family members and to spread time across members and for oneself.

Difficulties

When the profile participants were asked if there had been any difficulties in aligning their professional and personal lives with the 7 habits, one participant related it to making sure that their personal values, goals and aspirations were in overall alignment with their professional ones. The participant believed that in her present position it gave her a sense of integration.

For the other participant the challenge lay in coping with people who had different values and principles and where the sharing of the Covey material felt like hitting one's head on a brick wall. She also wished to become more motivated to do more physical activity.
Discussion

It would seem that participating in a programme on the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People had positive outcomes for the participants. They all spoke eagerly about what the respective seven habits had meant to them. Their practice had brought about change within both their professional and personal lives. All 7 habits had direct bearing on their roles within educational settings that people were working in as well as the one community based setting. In summarising the effects of the programme as identified by the participants it does appear that as a result of participating in the course they are now:

Professionally

- working more positively with staff;
- communicating better with staff
- choosing how to respond rather than react.
- articulating vision and mission
- more organised
- allocating time to prioritised tasks
- eliminating tasks that get in the way of achievement
- working to mutual satisfaction
- reversing trying to get people to understand to trying to understand people
- listening better
- teaming.

Personally

- clarifying a personal vision and mission
- setting personal goals and personal priorities
- shelving tasks that are not as important
- talking more through issues with family and partners
- sharing household responsibilities
- better rapport with partners
- replacing reacting with questioning
- teaming with partners, family and in particular teenagers
having time out for oneself and looking after oneself.

It would appear from the findings of this study that for the small number of people who accepted the invitation to discuss the outcomes of attending a programme on Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective People that they have gained both professionally and personally. Although the number of participants was small the positive nature of the findings suggests that a larger study is in order and needed if more definitive findings are to be reached as to the value of teaching Covey’s material to senior educators. It is suggested that a way to interest more participants would be to issue the invitation to participate in a research project at the completion of the 7 Habits course and to systematically follow people up throughout set time intervals over the next 6-12 months. If this was workable a longitudinal study could be in the making, nevertheless at this stage the profiles that have begun as part of the study will be completed.

In conclusion and leaving the word to Stephen Covey:

By centering our lives on timeless, unchanging principles, we create a fundamental paradigm of effective living. It is the centre that puts all other centres in perspective" (Covey Leadership Centre, 1993, p. 11).

References:


