



Principled Communication

By Stephen R. Covey



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Since the publication of my book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, I have worked with many wonderful individuals who are seeking to improve the quality of their communications, relationships, products, services, organizations, and lives.

But sadly, I see many people using a variety of ill-advised approaches. In effect, they try to apply short-cut, manipulative practices learned in academic and social systems to natural systems, the "farms" of their lives.

The Problem: Alternate Centers

Let me share with you some examples of the problem. Then I will suggest the principle-centered solution.

- Some executives justify heavy-handed means in the name of virtuous ends. They say that "business is business" and that "ethics" and "principles" sometimes have to take a back seat to profits. Many see no correlation between the quality of their personal lives at home and the quality of their communications at work. Because of the social and political environment inside their organizations and the fragmented markets outside, they think they can abuse relationships at will and still get results.
- The head coach of a professional football team once told me that some players don't pay the price in the off-season. "They come to camp out of shape," he said. "Somehow they think they can fool me, make the team, and play great in the games."



- When I ask in my seminars, "How many of you would agree that the vast majority of the work force possess far more capability, creativity, talent, initiative, and resourcefulness than their present jobs allow or require them to use?" The affirmative response is about 99 percent. We all admit that our greatest resources are being wasted.
- Our heroes are often people who make a lot of money. And when some hero an actor, entertainer, athlete, or other professional suggests that we can get what we want by practicing hardball negotiation, closing win-lose deals, and playing by our own rules, we believe them, especially if social norms reinforce what they say.
- Some parents don't pay the price with their kids, thinking they can fake it for the public image and then shout and slam the door. They are then shocked to see that their teenage kids experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sex to fill the void in their lives.
- When I invited one executive to involve all his people and take six months to write a corporate mission statement, he said, "You don't understand, Stephen. We will whip this baby out this weekend." I see people trying to do it all over a weekend trying to rebuild their marriage on a weekend, trying to change a company culture on a weekend, trying to pump out a major new business proposal. Some things just can't be done over a weekend.
- Many executives take criticism personally because they are emotionally dependent on their employees' acceptance of them. A state of collusion is established where executives and employees need each other's weaknesses to validate their perceptions of each other and to justify their own lack of production.
- In management, everything goes to measurement. July belongs to the operators, but December belongs to the controllers. And the figures are manipulated at the end of the year to make them look good. The numbers are supposed to



be precise and objective, but everyone knows they are based on subjective assumptions.

- Most people are turned off by "motivational" speakers who have nothing more to share than entertaining stories mingled with "motherhood and apple pie" platitudes; they want substance; they want process; they want more than aspirin and band-aids for acute pain. They want to solve their chronic problems and achieve long-term results.
- I once spoke to a group of executives at a training conference and discovered that they were bitter because the CEO had "forced" them to "come and sit for four days to listen to a bunch of abstract thoughts." They were part of a paternalistic culture that saw training as an expense, not an investment. Their organization managed people as things.
- In school, we ask students to tell us what we told them; we test them on our lectures. They figure out the system, and then they party, procrastinate, and cram to get the grades. They think all of life operates on the same short-cut system.

The Solution: Center on Principles

These are problems that common approaches can't solve. Quick, easy, free, and fun approaches won't work on the "farms" of our lives because there we're subject to natural laws and governing principles. Natural laws, based upon principles, operate regardless of our awareness of them or our obedience to them.

Often habits of ineffectiveness are rooted in our social conditioning toward quick-fix, short-term thinking. In school, many of us procrastinate and then successfully cram for tests. But does cramming work on a farm? Can you go two weeks without milking the cow, and then get out there and milk like crazy? Can you



"forget" to plant in the spring, goof off all summer, and then hit the ground real hard in the fall to bring in the harvest? We might laugh at such ludicrous approaches in agriculture, but then in academic environments, we might cram to get grades and degrees.

The only thing that endures over time is the law of the farm: I must prepare the ground, put in the seed, cultivate, weed, water, and nurture growth. So also in a business or a marriage there is no quick fix where you can just move in and magically make everything right with a positive mental attitude and a package of success formulas.

Correct principles are like compasses: they are always pointing the way. And if we know how to read them, we won't get lost, confused, or fooled by conflicting voices and values. Principles such as fairness, equity, justice, integrity, honesty, and trust are not invented by us: they are the laws of the universe that pertain to human relationships and organizations. They are part of the human condition, consciousness, and conscience.

People instinctively trust those whose personalities are founded upon correct principles. We have evidence of this in our long-term relationships. We learn that technique is relatively unimportant compared to trust, which is the result of our trustworthiness over time. When trust is high, we communicate easily, effortlessly, instantaneously. We can make mistakes, and others will still capture our meaning. But when trust is low, communication is exhausting, time-consuming, ineffective, and inordinately difficult.

Most people would rather work on their personality than on their character. The former may involve learning a new skill, style, or image, but the latter involves changing habits, developing virtues, disciplining appetites and passions, keeping promises, and being considerate of the feelings and convictions of others. Character development is the best manifestation of our maturity. To value oneself and, at the same time, subordinate oneself to higher



purposes and principles is the paradoxical essence of highest humanity and the foundation of effective leadership.

Principle-centered leaders are men and women of character who work with competence "on farms" with "seed and soil" and who work in harmony with natural, "true north" principles and with the law of the harvest. They build those principles into the center of their lives, into the center of their relationships, into the center of their communications and contracts, into their management processes, and into their mission statements.

Dr. Stephen R. Covey is an internationally respected leadership authority, family expert, teacher, organizational consultant, and co-chairman of FranklinCovey Co. He is also the author of several acclaimed books, including The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

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