

# Leadership Development Interview With Stephen Covey

by Sharif Khan on 2007-09-23

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“The call and need of a new era is for greatness. It’s for fulfillment, passionate execution and significant contribution.” - Stephen R. Covey, from *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*

Making a rare public appearance in Toronto at the Mississauga Living Arts Centre, world-respected leadership authority and author of the international bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, named the #1 Most Influential Business Book of the Twentieth Century, Dr. Stephen R. Covey spoke on his latest book, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* to a packed audience.

Having taught principle-centered leadership for over four decades, this living legend and world icon, with his quiet energy and grace, epitomized a call to greatness and earned the respect of the audience -- standing as a grandfather figure for unleashing human potential in many generations.

A hero to millions, Dr. Covey is known the world over for his landmark work around helping people take profound ideas, philosophies, and principles and distilling them into easy-to-use daily habits that anyone can apply. In his inspirational presentation at the Living Arts Centre, he conveyed simple yet very powerful gems of wisdom that I found practical and useful. For example, if you want your children to develop a love of learning and never have to rag on them again for not doing their homework and not getting better grades, simply ask them when they return from school, “Teach me what you’ve learned today.” By using this one simple habit, Covey claims he’s never had a problem encouraging his children to learn because teaching is the best way to learn.

Another gem he talked about is the habit of seeking to understand before being understood through empathic listening. In the audience of over 800 people, he asked how many people had any formal training on listening; only 13 hands went up revealing just how ego-centric of a me-me-me culture we live in. Covey related how many Native Indian tribes use what’s called the Talking Stick which is used in all meetings where the person holding the Talking Stick is the only person allowed to speak until he or she feels understood; when the possessor of the Talking Stick feels completely understood, then, and only then, is the Talking Stick passed on to the next person. This creates an incredible understanding and synergy among the team. Every business would do well to have a Talking Stick!

Covey then went on to the crux of his message which is the 8th Habit of becoming an island of excellence in a sea of mediocrity by finding one’s voice and helping others to find theirs. According to Covey, the main problem is that businesses are still trapped in the old paradigm of Industrial Age thinking even though we’re well into the Knowledge Worker Age. What’s required is a new paradigm he calls the “whole body paradigm” of integrating body, mind, heart, and spirit which he respectively equates to the principles of discipline, vision, passion, and conscience. The Industrial Age is still very much focused on the body (things, systems, structures, procedures, efficiency, bottom-line). But Covey estimates that approximately 80 percent of all the value added to goods and services now comes from knowledge work versus things. Twenty years ago that number was the inverse: only 20 percent.

So the key is not behavior – it’s the map. The key is the accuracy of the map. Once paradigm shifts the behavior will also shift. Covey clearly illustrated this point by asking everyone to close their eyes and point “North.” When he asked us to open our eyes and look around, I noticed everyone was pointing in different directions! In a similar vein, the majority of organizations have their people pointing in different directions; sighting a recent Harris Poll, Covey states

that “only 37 percent of workers say they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why.” No one knows where true “North” is. There is no moral compass, no conscience, no guiding spirit.

Part of the solution, according to Covey, is to have a transcendent goal, what he calls a WIG or Wildly Important Goal, that serves a greater purpose. Only once this goal is clearly communicated to everyone in an organization can quantum improvements begin to happen in the workplace.

Here is my interview with Dr. Covey revealing his latest insights from his most recent book, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*:

What sacrifices have you made to be where you are today?

I have worked very hard to dedicate my personal and professional life to principle-centered living. I am driven by a passion and conscience to spread understanding for principles and how to apply them to reach greatness. To that extent, there is no sacrifice – only a passionate, relentless commitment to my work, family, community and church to make a lasting difference.

What in your opinion is the most important attribute of a leader and why?

I believe the most important attribute for a leader is being principle-centered. Centering on principles that are universal and timeless provides a foundation and compass to guide every decision and every act. I’ve based my life’s work on promoting principles and teaching the power that resides in principle-centered leadership. Principles are not my invention; they are self-evident and are found throughout the world. If you look at all enduring philosophies, religions and thoughts, you will find principles such as integrity, compassion, trust, honesty, accountability and others at their core. I simply translated these principles into a framework of habits, which when followed with consistency and frequency transforms one’s character and allows one to earn the moral authority necessary for enduring leadership.

I must also clarify the definition of leadership, which is sadly and narrowly defined as position, title, status or rank. This is formal authority and not necessarily leadership. Through years of study, teaching and working with people all over the world, from all walks of life, I have determined that leadership is: Communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves. It is the influence we have with others to help them discover their own voice, to find their own purpose, to make their unique contribution, and to release their potential, that truly defines leadership. Thus, leadership extends to the many personal and professional roles we play – as workers, parents, children, teachers, students, swamis, you name it – and the choice we make to live by principles to help others find their voice.

In your book, *8th Habit*, you talk about finding one’s voice and developing one’s “unique personal significance.” How does one begin doing that?

To achieve greater heights each person must be challenged to find their voice – their unique personal significance and purposeful meaning – and help others to find theirs. Voice lies at the nexus of talent, passion, need and conscience. When anyone engages in work that taps into their talent and fuels their passion – that rises out of a great need in the world that they feel drawn by conscience to meet – therein lies their voice in life. *The 8th Habit* is all about how to find your voice and help others to find theirs.

What leader do you really admire and why?

One immediate leader who comes to mind is Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank. His story

is one that illustrates the path to finding one's voice and helping others find theirs. Muhammad saw a need, felt his conscience move him to try and fill that need and applied his talents and passion to fill it. In the process, he found his voice and helped others to find theirs.

Muhammad wanted to help his impoverished fellow citizens in Bangladesh. He met a woman who made bamboo stools only to make two U.S. pennies each day. He inquired about her work and found that the woman had no money to buy the necessary bamboo, so she was forced to borrow money from a trader on condition that she sell him her finished product at a price he dictated. This poor woman in essence was held hostage by this trader.

This woman was not alone, there was an entire village of 42 hard working people working in unbearable circumstances and Muhammad calculated that it only required \$27 U.S. dollars to help them out. He immediately gave the money to the people and told them it was a loan to be re-paid when they were able.

Muhammad even went further to ask the local bank to loan these villagers additional money and offered himself as a guarantor. Much to the skepticism and surprise of the bankers, the villagers paid every penny back on several loans.

Muhammad eventually expanded this loan program by creating his own microcredit lending institution called the Grameen Bank, so he could help numerous villages.

Grameen Bank now works with more than 46,000 villages giving micro-loans, lending approximately half a billion dollars a year to empower the poor (96% of whom are women) to produce and sell their goods and build housing. So far, the bank has assisted 3.7 million people. The micro-credit movement has now spread throughout the world.

What advice would you give youth who will become future leaders of tomorrow?

In my 8th Habit book I share the idea that everyone chooses one of two roads in life, whether you're older or younger, man or woman, rich or poor. The most traveled road is the one that takes us to mediocrity and the other less traveled road takes us to greatness and meaning. The first road limits us and prevents us from realizing our full potential. This road is often the quick-fix or short-cut approach to life. It often lures us to it when we don't take accountability for ourselves or see ourselves as victims. My advice to the youth is to avoid the road of mediocrity. It's probably hard for them to see into the longterm, but if they will try to see themselves as human beings with vast potential, and see that next to life itself their greatest gift is choice – they can choose their responses to whatever comes to them in life, and take responsibility for their choices, their behaviors, their feelings and choose to create their future.

My son, Sean, wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* to help [young people] become their best selves. He speaks wonderfully to the youth (much better than I), and I would recommend his book to anyone wanting to start good habits at a young age.

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