



The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Peer Leaders

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The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Peer Leaders

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Abstract

In this essay, we speculate that Peer Leaders who facilitate Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) workshops either intrinsically possess or, through the process of acting as a Peer Leader, develop “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” as defined in 1989 by Stephen R. Covey. In his seminal publication, Covey suggested that individuals who are highly effective in any context, whether that be in their career, in aspects of their personal life or in any other regard are characterized by:

1. Being proactive;
2. focusing on a clearly defined mission or outcomes;
3. being good at prioritizing;
4. pursuing win/win strategies;
5. being excellent communicators who practice empathic listening;
6. working well with a team to achieve synergistic outcomes to the mutual benefit of all; and
7. appreciating the importance of making time for rest, reflection and self-improvement.

Here we posit that all 7 of these habits of highly effective people are indeed evident in the most effective Peer Leaders, possibly as a consequence of their experiences of PLTL.

Key words: Effective, Facilitation, Peer Facilitation, Peer Learning, Peer-Led

Introduction

In 1989, Stephen R. Covey (1932-2012) first published his best-selling personal development book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (referred to hereafter simply as *The 7 Habits*) (Covey, 2020). More than three decades later, this book has been updated and re-published several times, sold in excess of 40 million copies, and been endorsed by an array of household names from Nobel Prize winners and Olympic athletes to Ivy League professors and CEO's of multinational companies. It has become established as recommended reading in a wide range of organizations around the world to support people in a diverse array of careers to become more effective, whether in their profession or in their personal life (Caprino, 2020).

In 2023, we were invited to reflect on the extent to which the habits articulated by Stephen Covey might apply to, or become developed through, the practice of peer leading in the context specifically of Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL). This changed the lens through which we read Covey's treatise on personal effectiveness and leads us to propose in this essay that both the concept and the practice of PLTL exemplify Covey's 7 habits. That each of these habits may be effectively developed in Peer Leaders could go some way to explaining why the skills developed by experienced Peer Leaders (Gafney & Varman-Nelson, 2007; Chase et al., 2020; Chase et al., 2023) appear to be highly valued by prospective employers, irrespective of where in the world the PLTL programs operate. (Apologies for spoiling the surprise by including our postulate in the Introduction, but, after all, Covey's Habit 2 is to "Begin with the end in mind.")

For the benefit of anyone unfamiliar with *The 7 Habits*, we list them here for reference as they appear *ad verbatim* in Covey's widely read and much cited book:

- Habit 1: Be proactive
- Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind
- Habit 3: Put first things first
- Habit 4: Think win/win
- Habit 5: Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- Habit 6: Synergize
- Habit 7: Sharpen the saw

We begin to explore the extent to which Peer Leaders either exhibit or develop each of these habits in a way that is not achieved through more traditional approaches to learning and through alternative forms of peer-assisted or peer-led learning. Here we share our experiences and our opinions to date, acknowledging that more robust qualitative and quantitative evidence would allow us to draw firmer conclusions on the role for the 7 Habits in PLTL.

Habit 1: Be proactive

Covey contends that the primary habit of highly effective people, without which none of the other habits would be possible, is to be proactive. He implores readers to recognize that you are the author of your own life, and to take personal responsibility for all that you think, all that you feel, all that you do, and all that you achieve. (In advocating the importance of being proactive, Covey logically contends that every individual is equally responsible for all that they don't think, don't feel, don't do, and don't achieve.) In *The 7 Habits*, proactivity and personal responsibility are portrayed as the bedrock on which the six other habits of highly effective people are each built. Nothing is possible without proactivity and a strong sense of personal responsibility.

In our experience, the best Peer Leaders do indeed exhibit high levels of proactivity and a strong sense of personal responsibility, if not initially, then certainly by the time that they complete a semester of acting as a Peer Leader. This is most evident both in the recruitment of Peer Leaders and in their subsequent preparation for workshops. While practices for the recruiting of Peer Leaders vary across PLTL programs, in many cases, students are usually proactive in volunteering to serve as Peer Leaders. Even where individuals are identified and approached directly by faculty, there is still a strong sense of ownership of any decision to become a Peer Leader. While some universities run incentive schemes to recruit Peer Leaders (offering benefits such as extra credit or direct payment), we are not aware of any programs where students are compelled and don't have a free choice of whether or not to serve as a Peer Leader. According to Covey's tenets, this element of choice is important in dictating their subsequent motivation and effectiveness.

In the Calculus 1 PLTL program at Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), Alfrey et al. (2023) noted that students in the 2019 cohort were particularly proactive and that this was associated with greater program success (lower rates of drop, fail or withdrawal). Throughout our experience of PLTL, the most effective and engaged Peer Leaders have been proactive in ensuring that they have prepared and planned for each PLTL workshop, whether that's participating in formal training or preparation, or simply planning ahead as to how they can most effectively facilitate learning in the workshop. We have noted a strong sense of ownership and indeed of creativity in how Peer Leaders approach facilitation that draws on, and is enriched by, their own life experience. This is elaborated below in discussing Habit 2.

Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind

Covey argues that when approaching any project or task, highly effective people have a very strong sense of what exactly it is that they are setting out to achieve. What would success look like, and, by extension, what would it look like not to succeed? PLTL is characterized by its clear mission and sense of purpose: to enrich the understanding and experience of those participating in PLTL through peer-facilitated learning, with all of the collateral benefits accrued both by the Peer Leaders and by the

participants in this small group approach to peer-led learning. This mission and these collateral benefits are shared with the Peer Leaders as part of the recruitment and training process. Before even facilitating their first workshop, Peer Leaders are encouraged to develop a shared vision of what success at the far end of the PLTL workshop series would look like, both for them as Peer Leaders and for their fellow students participating in PLTL. They are encouraged to think beyond the discipline-based content of the series of peer-facilitated workshops to develop their understanding of the skills and attributes to be developed through the practice of PLTL.

In discussing Habit 2, Covey emphasizes the importance of engaging your “whole brain” when envisioning success. He summarized the hemispheric brain dominance theory, which first emerged over two centuries ago (in the early 19th century following the work of Broca, positing that logic and verbal reasoning reside in the left hemisphere of the brain, whereas intuition, emotions and creativity can be attributed to the right hemisphere (Galaburda et al., 1978; Galaburda & Geschwind, 1981; Geschwind & Galaburda, 1985). While models of brain organization and integration were changing around the time that Covey first published *The 7 Habits*, his premise stands: that an effective individual can develop the strongest mission and vision before embarking on any project or activity by engaging their whole brain (whether viewed as two hemispheres or as four quadrants) to access a balance of analytical thought and logic with imagination and creativity. In three years of attending the annual conferences of the PLTL International Society (PLTLIS), we have been consistently impressed by just how creative and diverse Peer Leaders can be in facilitating learning and getting students to conceptualize abstract and intangible concepts drawing on very relatable, real-world analogies. We’ve seen experienced Peer Leaders draw on practical experiments, mathematics, virtual / augmented reality, visual metaphors, analogies and personal stories to facilitate learning and bring complex concepts to life (e.g., Marcel-Lewis et al., 2022; Olivas et al., 2022; Saucedo et al., 2022; Tipo et al., 2022; Willars et al., 2023; Aragon et al., 2024). There can be no doubt that either students who apply to be Peer Leaders have an inherent ability to draw on the logical, reasoning and creative areas of their brain, or that they have learned to engage their whole brain through their experience of PLTL.

Habit 3: Put first things first

After envisioning success and developing a clear and strong sense of purpose, in Habit 3, Covey notes that highly effective people ensure that they approach any project or activity in a logical, sequential order, putting “first things first.” This goes beyond the 16th century proverb of simply avoiding putting the cart before the horse and instead highlights how highly effective people draw on logic (attributed by Covey to the brain’s left hemisphere) to identify that which has to be undertaken and completed first as the foundation needed to ensure success in all subsequent actions.

The third of the six critical components of PLTL specifies that Peer Leaders are not only carefully selected but also thoroughly prepared and supervised to effectively facilitate workshops (Gosser et al., 2001). The most effective Peer Leaders exhibit Covey's Habit 3 in recognizing that supervision and preparation are fundamental to the success of PLTL. They understand the importance of asking questions to develop their personal understanding of the PLTL model and their role as a Peer Leader before they can co-create or review appropriately challenging workshop materials or facilitate PLTL workshops.

Much of the chapter which addresses Habit 3 in Covey's book is devoted to theories of time management and the 4-quadrant model / Eisenhower matrix approach to prioritization:

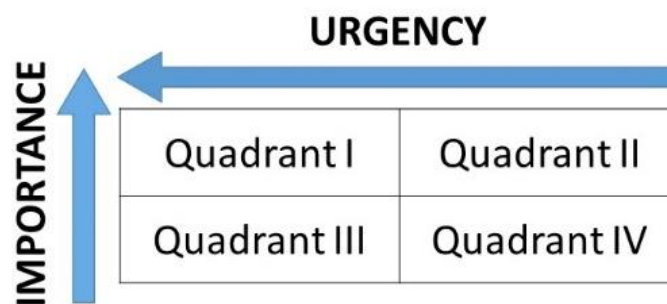


Figure 1. The 4-quadrant model/Eisenhower matrix approach: Importance vs. urgency

Covey implores readers to protect time for those tasks that are important but not yet urgent (i.e., in quadrant II), rather than being almost inevitably drawn to focus solely on those tasks which are urgent, irrespective of their importance (quadrants I and III). Being an effective Peer Leader requires excellent time management skills: Peer Leaders have to balance their role in facilitating the learning of participants in PLTL workshops (whether that's in preparation, delivery or assessment) with their own studies and other personal commitments (domestic, economic, recreational and social) inside and beyond college or university (Chase et al., 2020). That the most highly effective Peer Leaders have mastered complex time management challenges suggests that they are exhibiting Habit 3 and the ability to prioritize "first things first," including those activities which are ultimately aligned to the Peer Leader's vision and mission even before such activities transition into quadrant I of the Eisenhower Matrix (at which point they have become both urgent and important).

Habit 4: Think win/win

For Habit 4, Covey contrasts interactions between two individuals or two parties which bring mutual benefit ("win/win" scenarios) with those where one party gains advantage over the other ("win/lose" or "lose/win") and those where both parties suffer detriment ("lose/lose"). He notes that highly effective people always seek the mutually

advantageous win/win outcome. In discussing Habit 4, Covey draws attention to the fact that this often requires a highly effective person to identify what he terms “the third alternative”: a way forward that isn’t intrinsically skewed in its outcome to the benefit or detriment of one individual over the other.

It can be hard to apply these concepts, derived primarily from the world of business, to education. It could be argued that in traditional didactic modes of education, the student who learns new facts or concepts gains from the interaction, whereas there is little or no benefit to the teacher who leaves the activity having learned nothing new, but having spent time teaching content that they already knew (rather than learning something new or, particularly in research intensive, public colleges or universities, devoting that same time to alternative projects that would have brought greater benefit to their career). Stretching the point (and ignoring the fact that faculty receive at least an element of their salary to educate the next generation), traditional modes of education, as long as they are effective, could be classified as win/lose activities which bring benefit of knowledge acquisition / understanding to the student but at the detriment of the teacher. Where teaching is ineffective, we could even be faced with a lose/lose scenario where both parties lose time and energy for neither’s benefit: the student learns nothing new and the teacher has expended time and energy that could have been more productively invested in alternative activities.

If we have learned anything from our community of practice in PLTL, it has been that this approach to small group, peer-led learning delivers benefits (some common, others distinct) *both* to those students who participate in PLTL workshops *and* to the Peer Leaders: a true win/win outcome. Common benefits accrued both by the participants and by the Peer Leaders in this win/win scenario would appear to include:

- Enhancing and deepening the understanding of complex concepts through the consideration of challenging problems.
- An important opportunity, in an emotionally safe space, to be vulnerable in identifying and sharing where the margins of knowledge and understanding lie, as those boundaries get extended by working with others.
- Appreciating and valuing working with others in a team on a common goal; the recognition that teams can achieve more by pooling their efforts and experiences than can usually be achieved by an isolated individual. (This is returned to under Habit 6.)
- Developing a sense of community: getting to know and bond with fellow students, whether immediate peers at the same point on their academic journey or peers who are slightly further ahead or behind on the same academic path. (As higher education expands and class sizes grow in colleges and universities around the world, PLTL workshops provide a crucial opportunity for individual students to be

seen and heard, rather than feeling anonymous in a sea of 500 or more faces seated in a lecture theatre.)

- Growing in confidence and in self-efficacy.

Some of these benefits for Peer Leaders have been commented on previously by others (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Chase et al., 2020; Chase et al., 2023). While recognizing and accepting that some Peer Leaders will be drawn by the magnetic pull of acting as a teacher, the most effective Peer Leaders recognize that if, rather than acting as the teacher, they instead provide subtle and imaginative prompts to move discussions along, they facilitate learning such that PLTL delivers opportunities for personal growth to all participants *including* the Peer Leader in an educational win/win outcome.

In the preceding paragraphs, we have focused on the mutual benefits that PLTL brings both to Peer Leaders and to students in the workshop sessions. However, Covey's principle of mutual benefit and thinking "win/win" applies equally to the interactions that occur in between PLTL workshops, when Peer Leaders and instructors work together to discuss and co-create workshop content. While Peer Leaders benefit from the hints and tips that they receive from more experienced instructors to be better facilitators, those same instructors gain greatly from receiving the workshop feedback that gets relayed via the Peer Leaders. In hearing from peers in the proximal zone of development which topics students find more or less challenging, those instructors or staff can refine and balance the content of all of their teaching sessions to more effectively support and guide student learning beyond those PLTL workshop sessions. Hence, the mutual benefits to all involved in PLTL, whether students, Peer Leaders, instructors/faculty or staff, reverberate far beyond the PLTL workshops.

Before moving on to Habit 5, it is worth pausing to appreciate that the whole concept of win/win, win/lose, lose/win or lose/lose exposes a fundamental and widely held human belief that there is a dichotomy of winners and losers: in order for someone to be deemed to have won, somebody else (usually) has to have lost. At its logical conclusion, the very act of winning can be defined by "not losing." In Part 1 of *The 7 Habits* (Paradigms and Principles), Covey explores an equally false dichotomy of wrong and right: that in order for somebody to be proven right, someone else has to be proven wrong. He tackles the issue of differing perspectives and uses a well-known visual example to illustrate how different readers can hold contrasting perceptions of the very same image, both of which could be equally valid, neither being right nor wrong.

Critical Component 4 (of the six critical components of PLTL) (Gosser et al., 2001) is that participants should be presented with a challenging problem for which there is no singular right answer. A well-designed PLTL workshop should provide space for a range of perspectives and views, each of which may be equally valid, rather than a singular right answer than has any intrinsically higher value than alternative suggestions. A highly effective Peer Leader has the ability to draw out and respect differing perspectives, and to

facilitate discussions that move the group away from simplistic win/lose, or right/wrong discussions, to a place where all views can be expressed and valued equally. As discussed under the next two headings, this attribute of effective Peer Leaders is imperative and integral to effective communication and to synergizing.

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

Addressing Habit 5, Covey emphasizes the pitfall that many ambitious people fall into of dominating conversations, speaking to share their own knowledge or views with little or no regard for the contributions of others to any discussion. He notes that when many individuals stop speaking, they simply hear sounds, rather than listening actively and making any effort to understand what others are saying. Covey poses the question whether individuals are listening with the intent to understand or merely to identify when it is next their turn to fill space with sound: that many (if not most) individuals are always either speaking or just preparing to speak again.

A hallmark of PLTL as a model of peer-facilitated learning is that highly effective Peer Leaders begin workshops with some “small talk” to get conversation flowing so that students may feel at ease and use questioning techniques to engender the contributions from all of the participants in the workshop. The Peer Leader may ask primer questions, particularly if there are members of the group who seem not to be engaging with the discussion, but when they do, the emphasis is not on the Peer Leader speaking or explaining but using this opportunity as a catalyst to get others pitching in ideas (Dreyfuss and Fraiman, 2015). The primary role of a Peer Leader is to listen and to seek to identify where participants are lost, or may seem to have mastered a topic, and to locate areas where they could helpfully pose questions to unpack instances of apparent confusion or ambiguity.

Covey talks about the importance not just of active listening (as compared to passive listening or simply hearing), but of empathic communication. By this, he is referring to listening with the goal not of comparing the sentences being spoken by others to our own opinions or experiences (referred to as autobiographical listening), but to really understanding what is being said. What are the words which are being spoken telling us and, by extension, what are we learning from any of the words which are missing from the conversation? The most effective Peer Leader will be able to assess, by listening, which participants have both a broad and deep understanding of the topics under discussion in a given workshop, which participants have a narrow and/or superficial understanding with significant gaps that need to be filled, and which participants either have little or no understanding of the topics (or, alternatively, lack the confidence to participate in discussions). As with some other forms of peer-led learning, PLTL provides a fantastic opportunity to personalize learning and the student experience, but this starts with empathic communication and listening to understand where each participant is in their learner journey for a given workshop topic (Jevtic, 2012; Dreyfuss and Fraiman, 2015).

The importance of Covey's Habit 5 (empathic communication) is introduced in Peer Leader training and preparation, but can only be developed through practice and, even then, is most strongly developed in the most effective of the Peer Leaders.

Habit 6: Synergize

For Habit 6, Covey notes that when highly effective individuals work with others, they act in synergy: working together, they succeed in achieving not only more than either party would have achieved on their own, but more than the simple arithmetic sum of their combined efforts. In PLTL, the best Peer Leaders will support their workshop groups in achieving a collective outcome (in terms of learning of knowledge and depth of understanding of concepts) that could not have been achieved had those team members worked on the challenging problems for that workshop independently (Dreyfuss and Fraiman, 2015).

In addressing the issue of synergy, Covey addresses a fundamental theme that runs through *The 7 Habits*: the evolution and personal growth along the "maturity continuum" from dependence, through independence, to interdependence. He suggests that as people, we start life in a state of high dependence, reliant on others (whether that's parents, or siblings, or teachers) for our survival, growth and development. As we grow, our dependence on others diminishes, and so it is almost inevitable that we each evolve from a state of dependence to one of independence. Covey goes on to contend that only those people which he would classify as 'highly effective' mature further to appreciate that people are at their most productive when they come to recognize and value the benefits of interdependence: that a group of individuals working together can synergize and achieve more than they would have done working independently on a common endeavor.

The chapter of *The 7 Habits* which addresses Habit 6 really unpacks and elaborates what is necessary to achieve synergy and "creative cooperation." Covey highlights the relationship between communication and trust as prerequisites for teams working cooperatively. Effective Peer Leaders are not just excellent, empathic communicators (see the discussion of Habit 5 above); they can also foster the trusting environment within PLTL workshops which we now appreciate as a prerequisite for learning. At the 2024 annual conference of PLTLIS, Sarah Rose Cavanagh (Simmon University, Boston MA) addressed the importance of emotions to learning (Cavanagh, 2016; Cavanagh, 2023), and conference attendees discussed the role of Peer Leaders in creating the emotionally safe space that is so pivotal to effective, deep learning.

Covey also raises the issue of "valuing differences" if teams are to achieve synergy. Here again, Peer Leaders are prepared, through the use of icebreakers and facilitation techniques (McWilliams et al, 2019), to surface differences between individual participants and to draw on and value any differences that emerge between individuals' perspectives in the PLTL workshops. While not necessarily intended as a route to synergy, empathic communication, creating a safe environment of trust, and valuing differences

both between participants and their opinions, are all ways that highly effective Peer Leaders can support teams in achieving so much more than would have been possible simply as a collection of individuals.

Habit 7: Sharpen the saw

Perhaps the hardest of the 7 habits to evaluate in this essay is Habit 7. So, what exactly does Covey mean when he refers to the importance of “sharpening the saw”? In writing on Habit 7, Covey refers to the parable of a lumberjack who relentlessly saws away at a tree in the woods but makes less progress than they would have made had they protected time to stop periodically, rest and recover, and, most important, to sharpen their saw. (Variants of this analogy are used widely by personal development coaches and mentors around the world to convey the importance of making time for rest and recovery and for reflection and self-improvement, so that individuals can remain effective in a particular pursuit without tiring or becoming blunted.)

Obviously, we have little insight into whether highly effective Peer Leaders make time to rest and recharge in between the various demands on their time, of which facilitating PLTL workshops will be only one. However, we can identify occasions on which highly effective Peer Leaders pause both to oil and to “sharpen the saw” by way of personal reflection and self-improvement. Beyond their initial preparation to act as a Peer Leader, effective Peer Leaders are fantastic at forming both formal and informal networks and communities of practice through which they hone their skills, whether those are at a local, regional, national, or international level. Maybe the strongest examples of this habit are observed when Peer Leaders attend and participate in the annual conference of the PLTLIS. It has been notable that we have seen some of the same Peer Leaders at successive annual conferences of PLTLIS, and it has been obvious that every time we see them, their peer leading “saw” is even sharper and more effective than at our last meeting.

Conclusion

When we embarked on this task, we thought that Peer Leaders might exhibit between two and maybe five of the 7 Habits first drawn together and articulated in Stephen Covey’s seminal work published some 35 years ago. Having carefully reflected on our discussions with Peer Leaders and senior Peer Leaders in a range of PLTL programs across a variety of universities in the USA, Jamaica, and UK, we now suggest that the most effective of Peer Leaders exhibit all 7 of the habits as defined by Covey, whether that is because these attributes were intrinsic to those Peer Leaders before they joined the PLTL programs, or whether those habits were fostered and developed through becoming a Peer Leader. In either event, this does help to explain why experienced Peer Leaders have such fantastic skills (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Chase et al., 2020; Chase et al., 2023) and are so sought after by employers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Future research could assess the extent to which the practice of peer leading develops each of Covey's 7 Habits. We anticipate that this will require a combination of

qualitative and quantitative evidence but invite you to share how such research might be best designed and undertaken across various PLTL programs.

Needless to say, if you've found this essay thought-provoking or enjoyable, we can thoroughly recommend reading Covey's much read and cited book on which this article is based. But then again, if you exhibit Habit 1 and are proactive, you've almost certainly already read it!

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