
Taking Care of Yourself

Your attitude sets the tone for your class and your school year. In his book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey identifies essential habits that contribute to a positive attitude, sound well-being, and overall success. Your habits consist of your desire to be successful in life and in your profession; your skill sets that help you achieve what is important; and your knowledge, which is based not just on what you know but how to use what you know.

These habits are:

Be Proactive. Plan your work and work your plan. Discover the things you can influence and let that be your guide. It's easy to worry about things we have no control over but it takes effort to use our influence. Make it work – you have influence; make sure you use it.

Begin With the End in Mind. Life is about outcomes. When you plan your lessons, you always begin with what you want your students to know and work back from there. The same applies to life. Think about your career – down the road, when you retire, what would you want your current and former students to say about you. Periodically, reflect on this – it will refresh you and your practice.

Put First Things First. Time management is a basic essential of effective classroom management and, in your work, you will always have tasks to carry out that are both urgent and important, important but not urgent, urgent but not important, or neither one.

- Urgent tasks that are also important are those that require immediate attention – such as a major disruptive event. You have no choice but to deal with it at the time it happens.
- Urgent tasks that are not important include tasks such as emails or returning phone calls. They need to be responded to but you may be able to wait until later in the day when you have time. These tend to be things you need to make time to do to meet deadlines.
- Tasks that are neither important nor urgent are time-wasters – engaging in activities such as updating your personal Facebook page or playing games on your computer. Minimize these in the workplace to enhance your effectiveness in the classroom.
- **Tasks that are both urgent and important** are those that get you to where you want to be – whether it's the end of the lesson, the end of the year, or the end of your career. These are tasks such as planning for learning and classroom management, tasks that help be effective as a teacher and engage your students in learning such as differentiated instruction that teaches to the differences in all students.

Think Win/Win. Teaching and learning are about success and equal opportunity for all – this is the basis of public education. As a safe haven for your students, your classroom cannot be about creating winners and losers. Take time to listen to your students; don't take sides if there is a conflict; and be willing to assert your interests without disregarding the interests of others. Leave competition on the athletic fields; it has no place in the classroom. If you think of your students as winners, they will become winners.

Seek First to Understand. Conflict happens; in fact, it not only happens, it can also be productive. Positive conflict actually elevates dialogue and moves the focus to positive outcomes. To get there, however, you need to take time to listen to the other person. Be willing to sit down, face-to-face, and share concerns. Don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions, using words such as "what I hear you saying is. . ." or "let me ask you a clarifying question. . ." This opens the door to greater understanding and keeps the focus on issues and not personalities.

Synergize. Synergy brings together your core values, attitude, habits, and preparation. You chose to become a teacher for a given reason and synergy is the recognition that everything in your life has prepared you to be a successful teacher. Operating from your core values, aligning your attitude with them, sustaining the habits that make you successful, and using and expanding your knowledge help you become an effective teacher. When you synergize, you demonstrate more than competence, you demonstrate confidence. Take time to reflect on your teaching – think about what's working and what isn't working then identify changes you can make to keep the emphasis on your own efficacy.

Sharpen the Saw. Your career is your most important investment but your life is your most important asset. Take time to take care of yourself. Quality social time with friends and family, using a professional support network, and exercise are just a few of the things you can do to refresh yourself. Find the hobbies you enjoy or discover new ones. When you take care of your life, you take care of your career.

Covey also identified another habit and that one is *claiming your voice*. You have a voice, use it! We all have the right to be heard and to have our questions answered. Be willing to put your voice on the table, share your ideas, and ask your questions. Just as you need to understand where others are coming from, you need to help them know where you are coming from. Even if it seems uncomfortable at first, taking the initiative moves you from a being a bystander in your career to being a leader in your profession.

If you're enthusiastic and lead the way, students will be successful. As your students become successful, your reputation and credibility as a teacher will be recognized and you will be a teacher leader. And the nice thing is that the same skills that help you achieve effectiveness as a teacher will also help you achieve success in your personal life.

Your physical and mental well-being depends on finding the balance between life and teaching. The seven habits referenced here act as a guide. Ultimately, you have to discover what works for you so take time to identify those things in your life which give you pleasure, strength, and replenish you.