



The Seven Habits of a Highly Effective Integrator

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The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People was a fantastic book by Steven Covey, first published in 1989.

The book was tremendously popular and has sold over 15 million copies in 38 languages and has generated several follow up books. The premise of the book is there are seven principles that, if established as habits, would help a person achieve true interdependent effectiveness. Very few positions in Healthcare IT could be more accurately described as interdependent than the members of the Integration team. With that said, I would like to show the various ways that applying the principles of the book could enhance our ability to effectively integrate disparate applications.

1. **Be Proactive.** Our job is an exercise in making two disparate applications function as one. Every disparity is a challenge waiting to be resolved. There are two choices. The first is to be reactive. Being reactive means the disparities and the resulting issues seek us. When being reactive, it is natural to find ourselves blaming people, processes, systems, and other circumstances for the day to day challenges that we face. Covey's description of proactive includes taking responsibility for every aspect of your life (or in our case, our work). By taking a proactive stance, we find ourselves searching out the issues before they create challenges for ourselves and others. This provides us with a stronger sense that we can influence our work environment. We tend to see our work as more positive and we sense more control over our circumstances and attitudes.
2. **Begin with the End In Mind.** Before a painter makes his first stroke on the canvas, he or she can already tell you about the picture he or she plans to paint. Likewise, before we start integrating two systems, we need to have a functional understanding of how the systems we will be integrating "look" and how our data will be utilized by end users. Once we are able to "see" what our users expect to see, we can build an effective plan for providing what is expected. While many integration people are quick to develop data specifications for the

interface, seldom do we make detailed notes about how the data will “appear.” Our jobs are more than just moving and transforming data: we integrate systems and functionality. A technical document, combined with our functional understanding, can then become our “personal vision statement”.

3. **Put First Things First.** In this section of the book, Covey provides his views on how to properly separate and prioritize work tasks and goals. He helps readers understand the difference between urgent and important. In addition, he discusses delegation as a critical part of time management (although as a multi-year veteran of the Integration business, I have seldom had many people to delegate tasks to, maybe you’ll have better luck!). My focus in this area is to understand that we do have to make frequent decisions about which “tasks” are urgent and which are merely important. In addition, we do not want to lose sight of the big picture: analysis precedes specifications, specifications precede code, and code precedes testing.
4. **Think Win/Win.** Nowhere is the term Win/Win more important than in forging positive integration solutions. One of the things that I have learned is that when integration teams set “rules” or “guidelines”, those rules get in the way of seeking and negotiating win/win solutions. We should look at each issue as an opportunity to find the best resolution available for all parties without having biases toward the “correct” solution prior to evaluation.
5. **Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood.** I have been on many calls where we are seeking to resolve an outstanding issue. Many of those calls have been an amazing display of multiple participants all wanting to present their thoughts without investing any time into listening to and discussing the thoughts of others. The result is typically a highly emotional, highly ineffective use of time. We will find ourselves being more effective if we frame our calls/discussions, in such a way, to allow all parties to gather the required information, whiteboard a set of potential solutions, and analyze which of the potential solutions will be the most effective. One additional by-product of listening is that the most effective solution will most likely be found using the core of one of the proposed solutions that has been modified using portions of the other proposals or has been improved on by the team.

6. **Synergize.** When properly utilized, teamwork can be an effective means of accomplishing difficult tasks. Synergy is best described as a state where the effect of two people working together is more effective than the combined individual efforts. If we start with a clearly defined set of goals, we find that it is easier to accomplish the tasks that make a big difference in our ability to deliver the solutions we are asked to provide. We find we are able to apply effective problem solving, execute collaborative decision making, value our differences and build on our divergent strengths. The whole truly can be greater than the sum of its' parts.
7. **Sharpen the Saw.** We have to focus on the fact that our jobs are only truly great when we find some level of self-satisfaction in our lives. In order to do this, we must take some time to take care of ourselves. Because our work does tend to require 24X7 attention, we sometimes find ourselves working long hours and not taking opportunities to rest or to get training. Since we do our best work when we are well rested, it is important to take vacations and other time off and get that much needed rest. In addition, none of us want to find ourselves lacking new skills in an industry with a high turnover rate such as technology and tools. It is easy for us to envision how foolish it appears to use a dull saw. Likewise, it is equally foolish to deny ourselves the opportunity to sharpen ourselves.

In summary, the principles I have outlined here have the potential to have an extremely positive impact on your integration team and can also be used in other areas of your IT team as well.

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