

## First things first: A Critical Book Review

Sonia Sethi<sup>1</sup>

Authors: Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill

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### OVERVIEW

*“You can’t get second things by putting them first. You get second things only by putting first things first.”* C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

A powerful and thought-provoking, “First Things First” is written by Stephen R. Covey, and his associates A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill published in 1994. The essence of this book is to put the first things first i.e. the underlying idea of the book proclaims about the philosophy of setting priorities. This principle is actually Habit 3 from Stephen Covey's best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This book propose a radical thought and approach to time management- the essence of time management is to organize and execute around priorities. This is principle-centered approach. It transcends the traditional prescriptions of doing more, faster, harder, and smarter. Rather than offering ‘a clock,’ the authors advocate developing ‘a compass,’ emphasizing that life is not merely a matter of speed or efficiency, but it’s much more a matter of what you do and why you do it and where you are headed i.e. to achieve effectiveness. It emphasizes on making the distinction between what’s merely “urgent” and what’s really “important” and helps to figure out the excellent techniques for identifying those which are important to put at first. It is important to differentiate between what is urgent and what is vital. The urgent may appear like it needs instant

attention, but it is rarely vital that it be done right at that very moment. In Covey's view, people strives hard to put important things first that are important to them, but they are often diverted by things that are "urgent"— things that have to be done *right now* that aren't essentially a part of the central values of our life and to bring positive change in life, people need to reorganize the way they spend time; based on the concept of importance - not urgency. Briefly, "First Things First" means setting the priorities - to do first (what's most important *now*), and will empower you to define what is truly important; to accomplish worthwhile goals; and to lead rewarding and balanced lives. It will give you the principles, mindset and skillset to succeed—at home or at work. The book is majorly organized into four sections as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Sonia Sethi, Lecturer, Islamic College University, Peshawar.

**Section One:** The clock and the compass

**Section Two:** The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing

**Section Three:** The synergy of interdependence

**Section Four:** The power and peace of principle-centered living

### Review

#### Section One: The Clock and the Compass

*"The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities"*

Stephen R. Covey

In this section the authors explain that putting first things first can be characterized by the contrast between two powerful tools: the clock and the compass. The clock represents our commitments, appointments, schedules, goals, activities-what we do with, and how we manage our time. The compass represents our

vision, values, principles, mission, conscience, direction-what you feel is important and how we lead our lives. Traditional time management suggests that being efficient and doing work faster and smarter bring peace and control in life but in fact it doesn't solve problems instead it creates a gap between a compass and a clock-what's deeply important and how we spend our time.

**How Many People on Their Deathbed Wish They'd Spent More Time at the Office?** In our effort to close gap between the clock and the compass, First things first reveals the three generations of time management philosophies. These three generations of time management have brought increased efficiency in our lives but still gap remains between what's deeply important to us and the way we spend our time i.e. we are getting more done in less time but where are the valuable relations, the inner peace, the confidence that we are doing really matters the most to all of us. In fact these time management philosophies are centered on the clock – focused on doing things faster and utilizing the moment efficiently rather than effectively – and fail to deliver on the compass, or the greater central values in one's life. In Covey's point of view there's clearly a need of fourth generation- one that embraces all the strengths of generations 1, 2 and 3 and abandon the weaknesses. According to him we need to move from the time management to life leadership-to a fourth generation based on paradigms that will create quality-of-life results. As Leadership decides what the “first things” are, and management is the discipline of carrying out your program.

Putting first things first has now become a dilemma at the very heart of life .The tussle for putting the first things first comes when we don't contribute to what is most important in our lives. We strive hard to climb the ladder of success bit by bit but at the end we discover that ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. We feel discomfort, empty and the success we achieved did not bring satisfaction in our lives. The awareness of this gap confronts us in a dramatic way when we have been given “wake-up calls”- loved

one dies, forgotten valuable relationships, divorce. Such crisis bring awareness that what we are doing with our time and what we feel is deeply important don't match.

### The Urgency Addiction

*‘Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.’*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

This chapter debates on two important factors: *urgency and importance*. Urgency means ‘*Getting things done*’ and Importance means ‘*Things that really matters and contribute to our overall objectives and give richness and strength to our life and they are things that we must act upon*’. According to David F. Jakielo, “*The most important thing in life is knowing the most important things in life.*” Covey argues that urgency addiction is a self-destruction behavior and many of us living in a tyranny of urgency. i.e. “Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.” Urgency addiction is temporarily painkiller. It's like cotton-candy satisfaction that evaporates quickly and leaves behind the chronic pain that comes from not putting the first things first. We need to understand what's important in our lives than simply responding to what's urgent. He lays out a time management matrix, made up of four quadrants:

**Quadrant I:** Important and Urgent – crises, deadline-driven projects, and pressing problems

**Quadrant II** – Important and Not Urgent – preparation, planning, and relationship building

**Quadrant III** – Not Important and Urgent – interruptions, most phone calls and mail and reports

**Quadrant IV** – Not Important and Not Urgent – trivia, busywork, time wasters, and escape activities

We spend time in one of these four ways and if we sit for a while and think profoundly we would come to know that many of us spending time in Quadrant I and III instead in Quadrant II.

Covey called quadrant II as “Quadrant of Quality” as it merely depends on important things and our fourth generation also based on the “importance” paradigm.

### **To Live, To Love, To Learn, To Leave A Legacy.**

*“Doing more things faster is no substitute for doing the right things”*

This section is logical in itself. It emphasizes on the self-examination in order to figure out the guidelines with which we can make our choices. This section is majorly divided into three sub parts:

- ❖ The fulfillment of the four human needs and capacities
- ❖ The reality of “true north” principles
- ❖ The potentiality of the four human endowments

#### **The fulfillment of the four human needs and capacities.**

Covey describes that we all have four basic needs: It includes our physical needs, spiritual needs, mental needs and social needs and the essence of these needs lie in the phrase, “to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy. According to Covey,” Any of these needs, unmet, reduces quality of life driving you to urgency addiction. Many of us take all these needs as a separate “compartments” of life and think of each component is independent in itself figuring out the balance while running from one area to another and ignoring the reality of their powerful synergy. We need to understand the interrelatedness and the powerful synergy of these four needs to meet the unmet needs to become endowed in order to create true inner balance, deep fulfillment and joy. The integration of these needs ignites the fire within our spiritual needs leaving behind the legacy.

**The reality of “true north” principles.** Covey has used the term “true north” as a metaphor for principles and emphasized that we need to know what is “true north”? Is it important to know

what and where “true north” is? Is it a matter of opinion? The underlying answer to all these queries is that “true north” is a reality that is independent of us and it helps to create an inner compass that empowers us to meet thousand challenges of the future and also align our lives with timeless principles and realities in the human experience. It let us know where we are, where we want to go, and how to get there. Covey argues that value something and focusing on practices and methods instead on results will not bring quality of life unless we value principles. These principles include service and reciprocity the power of principles is universal, timeless truths and if we live our life according to principles we will be able to create happiness and cultivate quality life.

**The potentiality of the four human endowments.** Covey describes that we, human beings, have four distinguished endowments that make us unique from other species: awareness, conscience, independent will, and creative imagination. The development and the synergy between these endowments is the core of the personal leadership and helps to create the compass that empowers us to align our lives with true north. In order to develop unique endowments and powerful synergy Covey suggests several different activities that would help to shape our lives like nurture self-awareness by keeping a personal journal, educate the conscience by learning and listening, nurture independency and creative imagination through visualization.

## **Section Two**

**The Main thing is to keep the Main thing.** The second section of the book proclaims and emphasize on how to fashion your life that will empower you to build quality of life based on principles and endowments and the choices being made by you reflect importance rather than urgency.

## ***Quadrant II Organizing: The Process of Putting First Things First***

*“Where there’s no gardener, there’s no garden”*

The central idea is that in order to have quality life, we need to work harder, spend enough time to nurture the things and keep an eye to identify what’s important and focus our effort on helping it grow. Rather emphasizing on daily planning which provides a limited view, we should work on the Weekly Worksheet that provides a view of the bigger picture. This section describes the various steps of organizing process which helps to overcome the urgency problem, develop personal capacity to align life with the principles that govern quality life and fashion mission statement into the fabric of our daily life. These are as follows:

### **STEP ONE: *Connect with your Vision and Mission***

What’s most important, you care about and make the moment in your life meaningful?

### **STEP TWO: *Identify your roles***

Important roles at workplace, in the family, in the community or in other areas of life and the distinguished role called “sharpen the saw” is a metaphor describes the energy you invest in increasing personal capacity in the four fundamental areas – physical, social, mental and spiritual

### **STEP THREE: *Select Quadrant II goals in each role***

Identify your activity in each role; use your compass instead of the clock. Listen to your Conscience. Focus on importance rather than urgency

### **STEP FOUR: *Create a decision-making framework for the week***

Translate your goals into the action plan. Put the big rocks first and fit in the other activities afterwards that will help you to focus on the important things and put the first things first

### **STEP FIVE: *Exercise integrity in the moment***

1. Preview the day

2. Prioritize activities through highlight, using ABC method or circle.
3. Use some form of T planning for the day: Separate your time-sensitive activities from the rest to make effective schedule decisions and focus on important commitments

### **STEP SIX: Evaluate**

Review your mission statement before commencing the next week and ask yourself :

What goals did I achieve?

In making decisions, did I keep first things first ?

### **The Passion of Vision:**

*It's easy to say "no!" when there's a deeper "yes!" burning inside*

This chapter talks about creating a powerful vision based on true north principles and empower you to say "No" to the less important things in your lives. It emphasizes to work on your mission statement as it is one of the powerful tools to cultivate the passion of vision. It empowers to put first things first, compasses ahead of the clock. The most significant life is deep inner life where you are connect with endowments of self-awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination and without these it is impossible to create quality-of-life results.

### **The Balance of Roles:**

*"Balance isn't either/or; it's and"*

The essence of this chapter is in learning balance. Balance is a "true north" principle. Many of us while investing tremendous time on one role or activity neglecting the other important areas of life and observe different roles as a separate departments of life and living in illusion. In fact these roles are interrelated in which each part affects every other part. Roles are like the branches of a living tree. They grow out of a common trunk (our mission) and roots (the principals). You need to identify your responsibility in each role for e.g. as a parent, as a husband.



**The Power of Goals:**

This chapter advocates about setting goal as a powerful process. Covey brings up with the view that all the time our goals aren't synergistic. Sometimes we set a goal with the view that it will create positive change and bring quality-of-life but in fact accomplishing one goal affects other areas of life negatively. This means that we should not only plan them but rather evaluate real worth of our goals in the context of life. While setting week goals, look at each role and use the what/why/how format. This will help you to figure out the goals based on principals and will create quality-of-life results that ultimate empowers to continually put first things first in your lives.

**The Perspective of The Week:**

*“Priority is the function of context”*

Most of us focus on daily planning and finds it effective but in fact it keeps us focus on what's right in front of us-urgent things rather than putting first things first. The chapter talks about the dilemma; gap between the close-up view (daily perspective) and wide angle view (mission and vision).

Covey recommends that we can close this gap by working on weekly perspective that provides a synergistic and synchronization link between the big picture and the day in a balanced and realistic way. Through weekly renewals we could get to know about our needs, capacities and true principles. Many of us work daily without any change of activity and at the end of the week found ourselves losing our energy so we should spend some time each week focusing on the goals of the next week and making sure that they must be in line with our long-term goal

**Integrity in the Moment of Choice:**

*“Quality of life depends on what happens in the space between stimulus and response”*

In our daily life we used to make plans, identify goals, mission and somehow translate them into the action to accomplish

them. But most of the time surprisingly we find that our day doesn't go as we have planned. It is being distracted by many other tasks which come across and we make gut responses to them that might not necessarily be in line with our big picture. The challenge comes when we have to make a choice to those circumstances that confront us and to respond them. No planning process or Quadrant II organizing can help us to foresee the situations that come unexpectedly but if we spend considerable time in Quadrant II; it will help us to live with integrity in the moment of choice. The essence of this chapter is that while setting goals for the week pause and connect it with your conscience.

### **Learning from Living:**

*“As long as you live, keep learning how to live”*

This chapter describes the evaluation process and emphasizes that we should review and evaluate week activities and constantly asks question to ourselves that what we have learned from the activities we had done in the previous week and are we learning from our living or repeating the same mistakes? The chapter suggests if you continuous review your past activities it will help you to review your mission, roles, goals and to create a outline for a new week with greater integrity in the moment of choice and empowers to learn from learning.

### **Section Three: The Synergy of Interdependence**

This principle found in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is all about helping people learn how to understand and build interdependence. This section discovers personal undertakings in the context of other people. It involves developing shared visions with in organizations and developing win-win relationships in personal, professional, and business life.

**The Interdependent Reality.** This chapter sheds light on the importance of the interdependency. Certainly, Our life, achievements and fundamental needs (To live, learn and leave a

legacy) is interdependent and to achieve quality of life is on working together, learn from each other and help each other grow. Interdependent empowers to create healthy. The chapter also explain the difference between third and fourth generation i.e. the fourth generation is a “people” paradigm and emphasize on the effective, synergistic interaction with people while the third generation focus on controlling and managing things. i.e. fourth generation is more toward leadership while the third generation is toward Management.

**First things first together.** The essence of the chapter is in win-win; it does not emphasize on competition rather on a corporate arena. In win-win situation people seek mutual benefit in all interactions The *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* introduced a three-step principle based process to create win-win:

1. Think win-win; always try to see how both sides can benefit
2. Seek first to understand, then to be understood; based on principles of humility and respect
3. Synergize; based on principles of valuing difference and seeking third alternatives.

**It’s not about who right is, but what right is**

**Empowerment from the inside out.** Anytime we think the problem is “out there” that thought is the problem, that’s the premise of the chapter. We put our energy into the things where we have no control. The underlying idea of this chapter is in Principle-centered leadership and focuses on the traits of an organization capable of handling this type of workflow: trustworthiness, accountability, self-direction, and willingness to look for the best solution. Organization culture cannot be borrowed like technology, information, capital instead it’s always home-grown and its same true for the family and various groups of people therefore people can only create empowerment from the inside out.

## **Section Four. The Power and Peace of Principle Centered Living**

The last section of the book describes the importance of Quadrant II and how it makes difference in the office, family, and teams and changes one's life. It also talks about moving from time management to personal leadership.

### **From Time Management to Personal Leadership.**

This chapter focuses on the fourth generation paradigm; it's more personal leadership rather than time management; it's a new process in a new paradigm and its impact on time and quality of life.

#### **The peace of the results.**

Covey concludes the book with genuine world examples and promises that by applying these principles individuals can find more power, peace and satisfaction. Covey explains that the peace comes from living the principles and putting first things first, is essentially a function of living a deep inner life. Principle-centered living creates peace in all four dimensions of life; peace of conscience, peace of mind, peace in relationships and peace in one's body. Moreover, Covey says, a principle-centered life is peaceful because it deals with life as it is, rather than how we perceive it should be. Finally, Covey suggests a simple question to use to frame daily principle-centered life; "Every day, ask yourself "is there something I feel I could do to make a difference" and then if there is, go do it.

#### **Recommendations**

I found *First Things First* immensely interesting and thought-provoking and the full work is fascinating, comprehensive and thoroughly uplifting. The book is stuffed with a lot of worthy ideas and is the ultimate legacy. The book demonstrates how to identify important things in life and the methods needed to prioritize to assure that substantial life-time is spent doing what's vital rather than merely urgent. Every chapter of this book has been

carved amazingly and emphasizes on the personal vision and mission that will help you to change your life meaning.

I would highly recommend this book to everyone to buy and go through it once. Don't simply read it; embrace it, engross it, practice its' principle and use the excellent tools provided by it.