



Paul Thomas

Focus on the things that really matter

WE are rapidly approaching the halfway mark of 2011 and already many of us have conveniently set aside our New Year resolutions. Discussing this recently, a former colleague confided his New Year resolution was to be more effective, to feel like he was getting traction and actually achieve outcomes both professionally and personally. Too often, he believed, he was pulled into areas that were outside of his remit or, more frequently, leapt into issues that he could not affect. Given this is a familiar scenario for many of us at one time or another I pressed him as to how he was going in 2011. He smiled knowingly and said, 'Much better, I'm focusing more on the things I can actually influence'.

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey outlined a model of habits that can assist individuals to become highly effective. The first habit contrasts the approach of proactive and reactive people. He posits that proactive individuals focus their energy, attention and seek outcomes on only those areas they can materially influence. He designated this as people working on their circle of influence.

Conversely, reactive people focus on a range of concerns, many of which are outside their circle of influence. When first applying this model it is sobering to see how small your circle of influence is compared to your circle of concern.

Given our energy, and therefore focus, is finite, common sense dictates you should focus only on areas that you can affect, which can in time lead to your circle of influence expanding. Conversely, spending your time mired in the things that you can't change sets up a negative environment. This dilutes your energy and adversely impacts on your confidence through a lack of progress. Often this can result in a reduction of your circle of influence.

I am sure many of us have examples from our professional life of colleagues who are known for their ability to deliver outcomes. Spend a little time with them and invariably you find they have great focus. Often they have a discernible energy about them, almost a contagious confidence, and invariably they are output-driven. Much of their success results from focusing their attention on only those things they can affect. As Covey suggests, focusing on your circle of influence

reaps the most benefit.

The benefits of this paradigm shift are numerous. It reduces dissonance and the frustration and anxiety that can manifest when trying to manage and resolve many competing issues. This promotes an environment conducive to success –when your energy is not being diluted across many disparate elements you focus with renewed vigour on key activities.

The utility of conceptual models is often determined by how easy they are to practically apply. How many times have we read the latest bestseller from a self-help guru only to consign it to the trash when it becomes far too hard to apply on a daily basis? Similarly it can be challenging to determine what elements are in your circle of influence as opposed to your circle of concern.

Some brief guidelines might assist. First, have a clear sense of your goals and assess whether they reside within your field of influence. You must evaluate critically your goals so that your energy is only directed towards activities within your circle of influence or actively expanding your circle of influence.

Importantly your behaviours and inner dialogue must support this new approach. As Covey suggests, reactive behaviours are reinforced by negative language such as, 'There is no time to do this', 'This always happens to me', or 'I can't do this'. This language is disempowering and results in an individual shifting responsibility to external factors. Proactive individuals are affected by external factors but as Covey points out they make a value-based decision about their response. They don't resign themselves to be a victim of circumstance, rather they focus on what they can influence and continue to maintain progress.

As a starting point, spend five minutes each day rigorously taking stock of your concerns and identifying the boundaries of your influence.

Be mercenary and cull those items that you cannot influence, or seek ways to expand your influence for those you deem critical. As always, repetition is the mother of learning and regular daily review will assist in embedding this new approach.

Now is an ideal time to consider harnessing your energy by focusing on your circle of influence. Reacquaint yourself with Covey's habits and you will be surprised what a difference this model can make when applied on a daily basis.

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