

Habit 1: Being Proactive

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The first habit that Covey teaches us about is the habit of becoming **Proactive**, which means being more intentional about how we live our lives. What distinguishes us as humans from other animals is our capacity for self-reflection—our inherent ability to examine our own character and the decisions we make.

Habit 1 means taking control of your life—taking initiative. It means being able to prioritize and focus more on things you can do something about. It means taking responsibility for your emotions and moods and your behavior. Proactive also means making the most of that space—or that moment right between the stimulus and your response to it—that second when you can pause and **choose** how you want to respond to something.

Another way of understanding what it means to be proactive is to think about its opposite: that is, a person who is not proactive is reactive. As Covey says, “Act, or you will be acted upon!”

Reactive people take a passive stance—they believe that the world is happening to them. They say things like: “there's nothing I can do” or, “that's just the way I am.” They think the problem is external to them. Reactivity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and highly reactive people often feel increasingly helpless and out of control.

Proactive people are agents for change. Covey says that the habit of proactivity is based on a fundamental principle that between stimulus and response, or what happens to you and how you react to it, we humans have the freedom to choose. We have the opportunity to use our free will to change ourselves and, sometimes, even our circumstances. Put another way, we often can choose how we want to react to a situation.

And think about how our words can reflect our attitude. You’ve heard people say—or you’ve said or thought yourself—“He makes me so mad!” Underneath this statement is the belief that I’m not responsible. That my emotional life is governed by something outside my control.

“If only my boss was more patient with me.” Underneath this statement is the belief that someone else’s behavior is limiting my effectiveness.

“I have to do it.” This can reflect an attitude that circumstances or other people are forcing you to do something—that you’re not free to choose your actions.

These are reactive statements. Do you know people who talk like this? Do you talk like this?

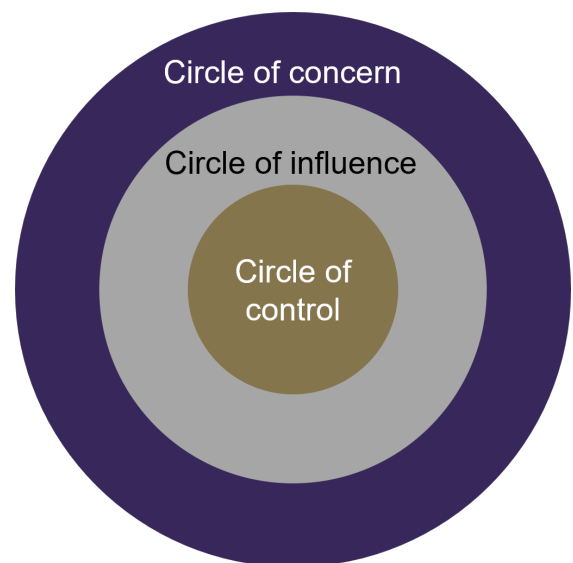
Covey challenges us to become more conscious of our language.

So how do we become more proactive? One way is to focus on things we can influence instead of focusing on things out of our control- because it is true that we cannot influence some things.

This diagram can guide you in what to focus on. The outer circle is the Circle of Concern. Things we can't control, such as weather, politics, behavior of people we have no contact with, natural disasters like earthquakes, fall into this circle. Spending time and energy worrying about these things robs us of time and energy we could use to exert influence.

The middle circle is where we can have indirect control or influence. We can influence our neighborhood, family, religious community, work environment, and friends. We can influence them, but not control them.

The inner circle—control—is where we can have real control over our own behavior, actions, and attitudes.



Reactive people tend to focus their attention more in the **circle of concern**. They focus on the weaknesses of other people and circumstances over which they have no control. The negative energy generated by that focus, combined with neglect in areas they could do something about, causes their circle of influence to shrink.

Covey recommends that we focus our thoughts, conversations, and energy on the **circle of influence**, trying to expand the size of that circle. To increase our influence, we must work on the things that we can do something about. When we are proactive and exert positive energy, then our circle of influence will expand.

As we close this lecture, take a moment to think about where your time and energy are being directed. Please consider the following questions:

Where do I spend most of my mental energy? Which circle is the greatest source of my worry?
How much of my conversation is spent talking about things I cannot influence?