

THE BIG IDEAS

The 12 Levers of Success
Here they are.

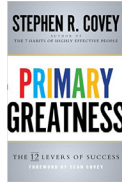
Esse Quam Videri
“To be rather than to seem.”

Virtues: Meet Your Parents
Humility + Courage.

Say “YES!!”
If you want to be able to say “No.”

High-Tech Power Saw
= Next purchase.

Crescendo
That’s how we want to live.



Primary Greatness

The 12 Levers of Success

BY STEPHEN R. COVEY · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2015 · 224 PAGES

“According to Dr. Stephen R. Covey, *primary greatness* is the kind of success that comes from contribution. By contrast, the trappings of success—position, popularity, public image—are *secondary greatness*. When you see the actions and behaviors of celebrities, famous athletes, CEOs, movie actors, or whatever, you’re seeing secondary greatness.

Primary greatness is on the inside. It’s about character. Secondary greatness is on the outside. As Dr. Covey taught, ‘Many people with secondary greatness—that is, social recognition for their talents—lack primary greatness or goodness in their character. Sooner or later, you’ll see this in every long-term relationship they have, whether it is with a business associate, a spouse, a friend, or a teenage child going through an identity crisis. It is character that communicates most eloquently. As Emerson once put it, ‘What you are shouts so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say.’”

~ Stephen R. Covey’s colleagues from the Preface to *Primary Greatness*

[Stephen Covey](#) is one of my favorite teachers.

In fact, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (see Notes) was *literally* the first book I ever read that introduced me to the idea that we could actually improve our lives and make a difference in the world.

On the first pages of my book, I share this quote from *7 Habits* as it so powerfully captures the essence of my work:

“I believe that a life of integrity is the most fundamental source of personal worth. I do not agree with the popular success literature that says that self-esteem is primarily a matter of mind set, of attitude—that you can psych yourself into peace of mind. Peace of mind comes when your life is in harmony with true principles and values and in no other way.”

(Which came right after this Nietzsche quote, btw: “*This is my way; where is yours?— Thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way—that does not exist.*” :)

Stephen Covey passed away in 2012. This book was published posthumously and features a collection of wisdom focusing on the fact that private victory precedes public victory.

Primary greatness. It’s all about what’s on the INSIDE.

Covey tells us there are 12 levers of success—each with its own chapter in this great book. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

“Our character is what we do when we think no one is looking.”

~ H. Jackson Browne

THE 12 LEVERS OF SUCCESS

"A life of total integrity is the only one worth striving for."

~ Stephen R. Covey

"Character, what you are, is ultimately more important than competence, what you can do. Primary greatness is, at its base, a matter of character.

I emphasize the preeminence of character in the lives of people because I believe character (what a person is) is ultimately more important than competence (what a person can do). Obviously, both are important, but character is foundational. All else builds on this cornerstone. Even the very best structure, system, style, and skills can't compensate completely for deficiencies in character."

Character.

It's the source of primary greatness.

There are 12 levers we can pull to optimize our character and tap into that primary greatness.

Here's a super quick look at each of them:

1. **The Lever of Integrity.** Our first lever of primary greatness: To actually BE that which we aspire to be rather than merely *appear* to be. This is the foundation of success.
2. **The Lever of Contribution.** This is all about your legacy. How will you make a positive difference?
3. **The Lever of Priority.** That which matters most must never be at the mercy of that which matters least. We must, as Covey taught in [7 Habits](#), put "first things first."
4. **The Lever of Personal Sacrifice.** It's time to go beyond what's in it for us and figure out how we can give ourselves in big ways and small.
5. **The Lever of Service.** Service again. How will YOU serve?
6. **The Lever of Responsibility.** Are you taking responsibility for *everything* in your life? Remember the root of the word = response + ability: Our ability to step in between stimulus and response as we CHOOSE the optimal response. (Again and again and again...)
7. **The Lever of Loyalty.** This is the natural fruit of service and putting others first. You are more loyal to them and they are more loyal to you.
8. **The Lever of Reciprocity.** This is another word for karma—we reap what we sow. Period. What seeds are you sowing?
9. **The Lever of Diversity.** Covey liked to say, "If two people have the same opinion, one of them is unnecessary." The core of synergy exists in differences. Celebrate them.
10. **The Lever of Continuous Learning.** We're either growing or stagnating. We need to commit ourselves to continuous learning and OPTIMIZING!
11. **The Lever of Renewal.** The 7th Habit says: We need to sharpen our saw. Even better: Invest in a power saw! :)
12. **The Lever of Teaching to Learn.** The best way to learn? TEACH.

"Selfishness is the source of our heaviest burdens in life, while serving others—lightening the burdens of others—is the very essence of primary greatness. Secondary greatness has nothing to do with service."

~ Stephen R. Covey

ESSE QUAM VIDERI ← "TO BE RATHER THAN TO SEEM."

"When I was working in North Carolina, I was given a shirt imprinted with the state motto in Latin, *Esse quam videri*, which means "To be rather than to seem."

This should be the motto of every person seeking primary greatness. Unfortunately, too often, 'seeming to be' substitutes for real integrity. It's 'seeming' as opposed to 'being.'"

Welcome to our first lever: TOTAL INTEGRITY.

*"Great minds have taught
'know thyself,' 'control
thyself,' and 'give thyself,' and
I would emphasize that there
is power in that sequence."*

~ Stephen R. Covey

(Notice the word "total.")

This is the first lever of primary greatness.

Are you an integrated whole—such that who you appear to be is who you actually are?

Or, are you dis-integrated such that you *seem to be* something that you are not?

No one is (ever) perfect and Covey makes it very clear that he was never perfect but this is the standard: A life of total integrity.

As Covey says: *"Primary greatness is about what is; secondary greatness is all about what seems to be."*

In this state of total integrity, we're not concerned about how things LOOK, we're concerned about how things ARE.

Esse quam videri.

—> To be rather than to seem.

Let's look at the source of this integrity:

VIRTUES: MEET YOUR PARENTS

"Humility is the mother of all virtues. The humble progress because they willingly submit to and try to live in harmony with natural laws and universal principles. Courage is the father of all virtues. We need great courage to lead our lives by correct principles and to have integrity in the moment of choice."

Virtues, meet your parents!

First, your wonderful mother: *Humility*.

And, your dashing father: *Courage*.

They make a wonderful couple. :)

And, they make all virtues possible.

The ultimate type of humility Covey is talking about is based on the recognition that our lives are part of a bigger whole and are driven by universal principles that are bigger than we are.

Whereas pride looks to impress, humility looks to serve.

It's interesting because the last Note we featured said pretty much the EXACT same thing in its first chapter. That book was *Legacy*—all about the All Blacks rugby team of New Zealand (arguably the best sports team EVER) and how their "secondary" or recognized greatness is a direct result of their primary greatness or character.

Here's how [James Kerr](#) puts it: *"This [after celebrating a big win] is when something happens you might not expect.*

Two of the senior players—one an international player of the year, twice—each pick up a long-handled broom and begin to sweep the sheds. They brush the mud and the gauze into small piles in the corner.

While the country is still watching replays and school kids lie in bed dreaming of All Blacks' glory, the All Blacks themselves are tidying up after themselves.

Sweeping the sheds.

Doing it properly.

So no one else has to.

*"Great minds discuss ideas.
Average minds discuss events.
Small minds discuss people."*

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

"Leadership is affirming people's worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves."

~ Stephen R. Covey

Because no one looks after the All Blacks. The All Blacks look after themselves."

Humility.

It's the mother of all virtues.

Courage is the father.

It's one thing to humbly submit yourself to a higher authority of universal principles. It's another to actually LIVE in integrity with those truths in the moment of choice.

P.S. Remember that the root of the word courage comes from the Latin *cor* which means "heart." Just as your heart is the organ that vitalizes all your other organs + arms and legs, so is courage the virtue that vitalizes all your other virtues.

SAY "YES!" IF YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO SAY "NO."

"A great challenge frees you to say no to a lot of things. You might find extraordinary psychological relief in taking on the big task and leaving behind the trivial. Often we find it hard to say no to the relatively unimportant issues we face in life and in business unless we have a compelling yes—some mission to serve, some quest to undertake, some goal to meet, some legacy to leave."

That's from the second lever: Contribution.

What are you here to do with this precious life of yours?

What legacy will you leave? What contribution will you make?

Covey coaches us on how to create more clarity on this by asking these questions: *"What does the world need from you? What are you good at? How can you best do what you like to do and meet real needs where you now work?"*

(Notice the similarities to the [JOY-MONEY-FLOW](#) model of [Born for This](#) (see Notes) with an emphasis on the contribution side of things!)

When we get REALLY strong clarity on our mission, we create a VERY compelling "YES!!!" which makes it wayyyyyy easier to politely say no to things that just aren't that important.

Stuff like obsessive social media. The 100 other good ideas you *could* pursue. Even email.

As I fully commit my life to my mission, I've definitely felt the *"psychological relief in taking on the big task and leaving behind the trivial."*

So, back to you.

What's your YES?!

P.S. Reminds of this gem from [Cal Newport's Deep Work](#) (see Notes): *"As the authors of The 4 Disciplines of Execution explain, 'The more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish.' They elaborate that execution should be aimed at a small number of 'wildly important goals.' This simplicity will help focus an organization's energy to a sufficient intensity to ignite real results."*

For an individual focused on deep work, the implication is that you should identify a small number of ambitious outcomes to pursue with your deep work hours. The general exhortation to 'spend more time working deeply' doesn't spark a lot of enthusiasm. In a 2014 column titled, 'The Art of Focus,' David Brooks endorsed this approach of letting ambitious goals drive focused behavior, explaining: 'If you want to win the war for attention, don't try to say 'no' to the trivial distractions you find on the information smorgasborg; try to say 'yes' to the subject that arouses a terrifying longing, and let the terrifying longing crowd out everything else.'"

"The secret of success of every man who has ever been successful lies in the fact that he formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do."

~ Albert E. Gray

"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

What arouses a "terrifying longing" for you?

Get clear. Say yes. Go ALL IN. And say no. :)

P.P.S. As I was reading this chapter, I made a note to pull a great quote from *7 Habits* about saying no. Then, in the next chapter all about the lever of Priority, Covey says: "Many times I have said, 'You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, unapologetically—to say no to other things. And the way you do that is by having a bigger yes burning inside. The enemy of the best is often the good.'"

NEXT PURCHASE: HIGH-TECH POWER SAW, PLEASE!

"You can't achieve primary greatness by neglecting yourself—your health, your mind, your emotional and spiritual life. Each of these vital areas of your life needs constant, even daily, renewal. Pushing the lever a little bit every day can offset a slow or even catastrophic downward decline in your personal energy and even save your life.

Many years ago, I began teaching the principle of daily and weekly renewal to students and business managers. That principle became codified in my book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw. Abraham Lincoln said, 'If I had two hours to chop down a tree, I would spend the first hour sharpening my ax.' There are many versions of this quotation, but the principle holds true. Such wisdom may be axiomatic, and yet we see many people who are so busy sawing (working, producing, performing, doing) that they never (or very seldom) stop to sharpen the saw (rest, recreate, study, prepare, reflect, rethink, retool, revitalize); nor do they invest in a new, high-technology power saw. Instead, they work with ineffective tools: poor social skills and a dull mind, dissipated body, and weakened spirit."

Renewal.

It's our 11th Lever and the 7th Habit.

We need to sharpen the saw.

In fact, if Lincoln was alive today he'd probably tell us we need to take the time to create a sweet new, high-tech power saw to get the job done!!

How?

Well, we OPTIMIZE one little 4% improvement at a time. We make waves and take the time to rock our fundamentals every.single.day such that we show up with a sharp mind, body and spirit.

How's that going for you?

Spending enough time sharpening?

What's ONE thing (just one little thing!) you *know* you could be doing that would have the most positive benefit in your life?

<— Let's do that.

LIVE LIFE IN CRESCENDO!

"Q: You have said that your most important final message is to live life in crescendo. What does that mean?"

A: It means that the most important work you will ever do is always ahead of you. It is never behind you. You should always be expanding and deepening your commitment to that work. Retirement is a false concept. You may retire from a job, but never retire from meaningful projects and contributions.

"We all have a moral obligation to the people who are important in our lives, as well as to ourselves, to learn and progress without ceasing."

~ Stephen R. Covey

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Crescendo is a musical term. It means to play music with ever greater energy and volume, with strength and striving. The opposite is *diminuendo*, which means to lower the volume, to back off, to play it safe, to become passive, to whimper away your life.

So live life in crescendo. It's essential to live with that thought. Regardless of what you have or haven't accomplished, you have important contributions to make. Avoid the temptation to keep looking in the rearview mirror at what you have done and instead look ahead with optimism."

Crescendo.

Playing our music with ever greater energy and volume—with strength and striving.

<— Love that.

The greatest among us are always looking forward with optimism and enthusiasm—joyfully finding the next best way to give their gifts even more fully to the world.

[Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) echoes this wisdom in [Creativity](#) (see Notes) where he tells us this about Creative people (with a capital C!): *"Like the climber who reaches the top of the mountain and, after looking around in wonder at the magnificent view, rejoices at the sight of an even taller neighboring peak, these people never run out of exciting goals."*

And I always love these gems from Emerson: *"Genius appeals to the future."*+ *"A feeble man can see the farms that are fenced and tilled, the houses that are built. The strong man sees the possible houses and farms. His eye makes estates as fast as the sun breeds clouds."*

One beautiful crescendo after another.

That's how we want to live—with primary greatness ever in mind.

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)

[Deep Work](#)

[Legacy](#)

[Creativity](#)

About the Author of "Primary Greatness"

STEPHEN R. COVEY



Recognized as one of *Time* magazine's twenty-five most influential Americans, Stephen R. Covey (1932–2012) was an internationally respected leadership authority, family expert, teacher, organizational consultant, and author. His books have sold more than twenty-five million copies in thirty-eight languages, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was named the #1 Most Influential Business Book of the Twentieth Century. After receiving an MBA from Harvard and a doctorate degree from Brigham Young University, he became the cofounder and vice chairman of FranklinCovey, a leading global training firm. Connect: stephencovey.com.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.