

The 3rd-Alternative: Solving Life's Most Difficult Problems by Stephen R. Covey

An Executive Book Summary

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The 3rd-Alternative Philosophy

Stephen Covey claims that there is a way to solve life's toughest problems, a way that neither one of us has thought of, he calls this "the 3rd Alternative" (Covey, 2011). Covey (2011) argues that there are two sides to most conflicts; the two opposing sides see their way as right and the other side as wrong. He refers to this as 2 Alternative thinking (Covey, 2011). Two alternative conflicts are everywhere in society for example, religion against science, white against black, rural against urban, liberals against conservatives,

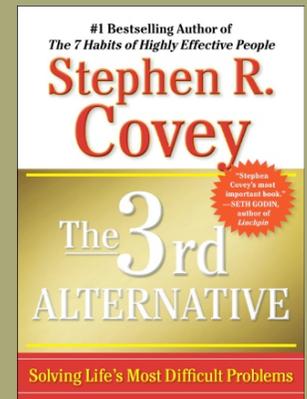
and so on (Covey, 2011). Each side is deeply rooted in their beliefs and usually identifies with what they believe, it describes who they are. Therefore, when someone attacks their beliefs they are attacking their self-image (Covey, 2011). Covey argues that this is why it is so hard for people to get passed the 2-alternative mind-set; the problem lies in our mental paradigms. Our mental paradigms influence how we behave, if we change our paradigm our behavior will change as well (Covey, 2011). Covey uses a simple diagram

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"There is a way to solve the toughest problems we face, even those that look unsolvable. There is a path that cuts through nearly all life's dilemmas and deep divisions. There is a way forward. It's not your way, and it's not my way. It's a higher way. It's a better way than any of us have thought of before. I call it the 3rd-Alternative" (Covey, 2011, p. 8).

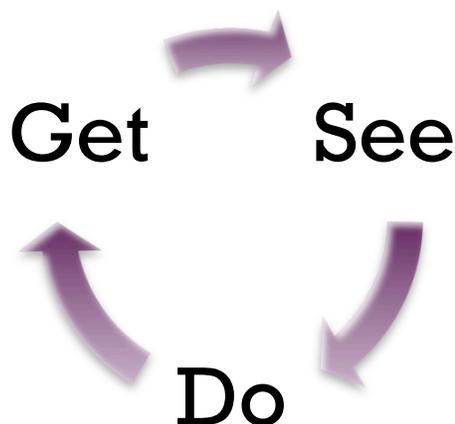
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to explain how our mental paradigms influence our behavior. The diagram is pictured below. In a typical 2-alternative conflict, I see my side or my paradigm and you see yours. I may either force you to take on my paradigm or vice versa, ultimately one of us loses. Covey (2011) claims that the following question is the key to resolving conflicts and transforming the future, “would you be willing to look for a 3rd Alternative we haven’t even thought of yet?” (p. 12). This is a question that is rarely asked during a conflict, yet it seems so simple. Synergy is what Covey refers to as the process of getting to a 3rd Alternative, it is what happens when two people

decide to come up with a 3rd and better alternative that neither has thought of before (Covey, 2011). He is quick to explain that synergy is not the same as compromise, since in a compromise everyone loses something (Covey, 2011). Synergy is not just resolving a conflict it is transforming it, it’s better than just my way or your way, it’s our way (Covey, 2011). You may be wondering why don’t we know about this? Why don’t we use synergy to solve problems all the time? However, the term synergy has been misused and most people do not understand how it works (Covey, 2011). Covey’s diagram and definition of synergy is displayed on the following page.

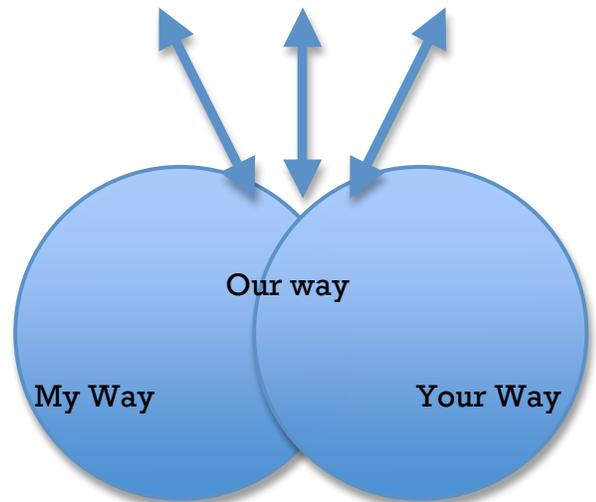
Covey (2011) discusses various examples and stories of synergy and the effects it has had on others and himself. He argues that without synergy your work will not move forward, but synergy will transform your work and life (Covey, 2011). He explains that synergy is the answer to human conflict and the principle that underlies all creativity (Covey, 2011).

See-Do-Get. “Our paradigms govern our behavior, which in turn governs the consequences of our actions. We GET results based on what we DO, and what we DO depends on how we SEE the world around us” (Covey, 2011, p. 10).



Synergy

New Ideas



Synergy. “The natural principle that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Rather than going my way or your way, we take the path of synergy to higher and more productive results. You and I together are far greater than we are alone” (Covey, 2011, p. 13)

The greatest obstacle to synergy is the lack of 3rd Alternative thinking or in other words a 2-Alternative mind-set (Covey, 2011). Within the 2-Alternative mind-set it's us vs. them or me vs. you, these types of thinkers don't see others as human beings they only see their beliefs (Covey, 2011). Many people are stuck in this mind-set and cannot see passed the other person's ideologies, to see them for whom they really are. Along with the 2-Alternative thinkers, there are those in the middle, those that do not take either side of the debate, they hope for compromise (Covey, 2011). According to Covey (2011), this is also a problem because these thinkers do not see the possibility of a 3rd-Alternative or a real solution to a conflict. Covey (2011) describes 4 paradigms or steps to 3rd-Alternative thinking, I see myself, I see you, I seek you out, and I synergize with you. These 4 steps are instrumental in achieving a 3rd-Alternative, without them there will be no 3rd-Alternative. Covey (2011) explains that each step is significant and that the sequence of the steps is also important. The sequence is important because each step or paradigm lays the foundation for the next one. Once you have adopted these 4 paradigms then your can truly get to a 3rd-Alternative. Covey (2011) uses a simple diagram to display how these paradigms result in 3rd-Alternative

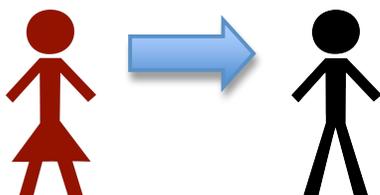
thinking. A recreation of the diagram is on the following page.

The first paradigm of synergy is the *I See Myself* paradigm; it is about seeing oneself as unique and capable of ones own judgment and actions (Covey, 2011). This paradigm asks you to think about what you see when you look at yourself? Do you see yourself as a thoughtful, respectful, open minded person? Or do you see yourself as someone who has all the answers, disrespecting those on the other side of the conflict? (Covey, 2011). Covey (2011) defines

3rd-Alternative Thinking



I Synergize With You



I Seek You Out



I See Myself



I See You

3rd-Alternative Thinking. To arrive at a 3rd-Alternative, I must first practice self-awareness, and value the different viewpoint that you represent. Then I must seek to understand that viewpoint thoroughly. Only then can I move up to synergy.

this paradigm in the following way “I see myself as a creative, self-aware human being who is more than the *side* I favor in a conflict. I might share certain beliefs or belong to certain groups, but these do not define me. I choose my own *story*” (Covey, 2011, p. 25). This paradigm draws a distinction between what Covey calls the typical paradigm “I See My Side” (Covey, 2011). Seeing yourself is much different from seeing your side. Seeing yourself allows you to set yourself apart from the things external to yourself, such as your beliefs. According to Covey (2011), you are not comprised of your beliefs; they do not define who you are as a person. Covey (2011), speaks of something called “The Real Identity Theft” this happens when people are unable to distinguish between their own mind and the mind of the culture. Covey goes on to explain that if you do truly see yourself, you will also see your cultural tendencies. You will be aware of your true motives, and be able to see beyond your own culture (Covey, 2011). Covey (2011) states, “those who really see themselves understand this creative paradox – that they are both limited and unlimited” (p. 29). In other words when you truly see yourself, you know that you

are not complete on your own, but also that you have endless potential.

The second paradigm, *I See You*, is about seeing the other person as a person not as a thing (Covey, 2011). When you look at others what do you see? Do you see their race, religion, sexual orientation or disability? Or do you see them as a unique human being with diverse talents? (Covey, 2011). Too often when we look at others we see what is on the outside, and look passed who they are as a person. We only see their culture, beliefs, and values. We do not see them as a unique person with individual talents. Covey (2011) argues that this paradigm is significantly different from the typical paradigm *I Stereotype You*. If we only see what is on the outside, such as race, religion or disability, this leads us to stereotype the person rather than really getting to know them (Covey, 2011), refers to the philosopher Martin Buber and his famous book *I and Thou*. Buber believes that too often we view others as objects, but a person is not an *it*, a person is a *thou* (Buber, 2000). Buber (2000) also argues that if we constantly see others as things or objects we will become an *it* as well, no longer a person. The term *thou* is used because it evokes a deeper

“In the I See You paradigm, you and I together are uniquely powerful because your strengths and my strengths complement each other. There’s no combination like us anywhere else. We can move to a 3rd-Alternative together. This is not possible if we operate under the paradigm of stereotyping” (Covey, 2011, p. 40).

respect for the other person, it suggests intimacy and trust (Covey, 2011). When one embraces this paradigm they see the other person as a complex human being, their respect for that person is authentic, and they can see passed their side of the conflict (Covey, 2011).

The third paradigm of synergy is *I Seek You Out*. This paradigm is about actively seeking out differing views instead of avoiding them (Covey, 2011). It is significant to see conflict as an opportunity to learn something, rather than defending yourself and your side. It is important to listen to someone who doesn’t agree with your side, they key however is to actually listen to them (Covey, 2011). Seeking the other person out is about seeking to truly understand their view and look at

the conflict from their perspective. Covey (2011) defines this paradigm in the following way; “instead of seeing your different viewpoint as a threat, I avidly seek to learn from you. If a person of your character and intelligence differs from me, I need to listen to you. I listen empathetically until I genuinely understand you” (p. 41). Covey (2011) goes on to discuss the importance of talking stick communication. It is a Native American tradition, a symbol of peaceful communication; the speaker holds the talking stick and no one can interrupt until he/she feels understood (Covey, 2011). In relation to talking stick communication is empathetic listening, truly listening to the other person for understanding. Covey (2011), argues that during a conflict we are usually thinking about our side, and are not actually listening to the other person talk. “An empathetic listener seeks to understand the thoughts and feelings of the other” (Covey, 2011, p. 49).

The fourth paradigm of synergy, *I Synergize With You*, is about coming up with that solution that no one has thought of yet, a better solution (Covey, 2011). “Synergy is the process of actually creating the 3rd-Alternative” (Covey, 2011, p. 60). Covey (2011) also refers to

this as *the paradigm of creation* that contrasts with the typical paradigm *I Attack You*. In the typical paradigm I look for a fight, and insist on my solution. I make sure that the other side loses (Covey, 2011). Whereas in the *I Synergize With You* paradigm, we look together for a 3rd-Alternative (Covey, 2011). Covey (2011) describes the importance of meeting the first, second and third paradigms before arriving at the fourth. In order to synergize with you I must first see myself, see you, and seek you out. I must see who I really am as a person aside from my beliefs. I then must see you as a human being rather than an object or a stereotype. Thirdly I must listen to your side empathetically and understand your perspective. Once these three paradigms have been met, we can synergize together.

The 4 Steps to Synergy

1. ASK: 3rd-Alternative Question:

Are you willing to go for a solution that is better than any of us has come up with yet?

2. DEFINE: Criteria of Success

3. CREATE: 3rd Alternatives

4. ARRIVE: At Synergy or a 3rd Alternative

Section 2: Critical Evaluation of The 3rd-Alternative

Stephen Covey's *The 3rd-Alternative* is significant portrayal of conflict resolution. Covey's simple diagrams and easy to follow steps make the 3rd-Alternative applicable to various audiences. I believe that the 3rd-alternative mind-set is an important predictor in how a conflict will be resolved. By adopting the paradigms necessary for synergy and creating 3rd-alternatives, we can come up with better solutions to our conflicts. One quote that really resonated with me was "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Covey, 2011, p. 51). I believe that it is very important to listen empathetically to others and to truly understand where they are coming from in order to solve a conflict. More often than not if you truly listen to the other person's side and understand where they are coming from, you will be less likely to attack them. Covey describes the principles, paradigms, and process of synergy in the first section of the book, in simple general terms. I thought that this first section was very informative and could easily be applied to most situations where conflict

may arise. The following sections of the book discuss the 3rd-Alternative in various life contexts such as, work, home, school, society, and the law. These sections of the book are more specific to using the 3rd-Alternative in that certain aspect. I found that these sections were helpful in understanding how they 3rd-Alternative works in different environments. However, some of the sections did not apply to me, and my career choice, such as the section on the 3rd-Alternative at work. This section focused mainly on using the 3rd-Alternative in corporate environments, such as sales and marketing. Although it was informative to see the 3rd-Alternative in various contexts, I related more to the 3rd-Alternative in the home, school, society, and life. Covey's philosophy is very positive and I would like to adopt this way of thinking. However, I can't help but to be a little skeptical, what about the people who don't read this book? Who don't know about the 3rd-Alternative? This philosophy would be ideal if more people were aware of it,

but just because people are aware of it does not necessarily mean they will adopt this philosophy. Perhaps one is skeptical because it seems so simple and it makes you wonder why you have never thought like this before. If I can make others around me aware of the principle of the 3rd-Alternative, maybe they in turn will make others aware and spread the joy of creating a new and better solution that no one has thought of before.



Section 3: Key Concepts of the 3rd-Alternative

- Getting passed the 2-Alternative mind-set
- Synergy
- The 4 paradigms of synergy
- The importance of the sequence of the 4 paradigms
- I see myself (Paradigm 1) – The concept of the real identity theft
- I see you (Paradigm 2) – You=Thou
- I seek you out (Paradigm 3) – Empathetic listening/talking stick communication
- I synergize with you (Paradigm 4) – The process of creating 3rd-Alternatives