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Stephen R. Covey Guides You to a Win-Win

Review by Chris Murray

THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE: SOLVING LIFE'S MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEMS

by Stephen R. Covey

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In an age of contention and intransigence, when so many people, or certainly their leaders at the political level, seem to be deeply divided and unwilling to work together, the idea that there is a radical new win-win approach to conflict and collaboration is enticing. Knowing that this approach springs from the mind and work of Stephen Covey is even more intriguing, for with his first book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the then-unheralded Covey fundamentally changed the way many people approach life and success.

As with many of Covey's ideas, the titular concept in the book — the 3rd Alternative — is deceptively simple. In most conflicts, there are two alternatives: my way and your way. The key to resolving conflicts in a win-win way is to find a 3rd Alternative — “our way.”

At first glance, this may hardly seem new. Aren't conflicts always resolved by finding a solution that, through negotiation, embraces a bit of my way and your way? As Covey emphasizes throughout the book, the 3rd Alternative is not a compromise that opposing sides can live with. Compromise is a lose-lose solution because each side must reluctantly give up — lose — something it wants. The 3rd Alternative is a win-win solution in which each side gets everything it wants.

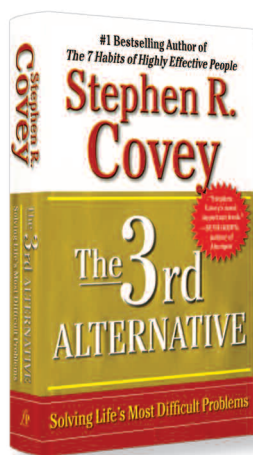
Finding Harmony with an Alternative

Covey tells the story of how a government in an unidentified country decreed that all classroom time should be spent on core academic topics, such as reading and mathematics. There would be no time for music. This distressed one student's mother, who was a professional musician and thought that music was a key subject area that needed to be taught at school. It also distressed the girl's teacher, who agreed with the mother. But what could they do? The teacher's paradigm, forced on her by the government, was that all class time had to be spent on non-music classes. The mother's paradigm was that some class time should be devoted to music. Who would win?

They both did, Covey writes. The solution was for the teacher and the musical parent to teach the core academics subjects using music. Music was used to teach fractions (one eighth note plus a second eighth note equals one quarter note).

Poems were sung. History was learned through the study of great composers and their times. Foreign languages were taught by singing folk songs of other countries.

Covey tells this story to illustrate the key ingredient to creating or discovering a 3rd Alternative: synergy. Synergy, of course, is based on the idea that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Music, in fact, is a great example of synergy. A beautiful harmony is impossible if you play one note and then another and then another. Adding single notes together might get you a melody (and a rather spare one at that), but no harmony.



The only time you will hear a harmony is if all the notes are played together. “Like musical notes, synergistic people do not lose their identity,” Covey writes. “They combine their strengths with the strengths of others to produce a result far greater than anything either could achieve alone.”

To resolve the dilemma of music vs. academics, the musical parent and the teacher combined their strengths to create a 3rd Alternative.

Readers will see in Covey’s story the difference between what he calls traditional 2-Alternative thinking and a 3rd Alternative solution. The 3rd Alternative solution avoids the typical win-lose outcome that results from conflict. Covey’s choice of education as one of the areas to illustrate his concept demonstrates two of his strengths as a writer. First, Covey grounds his argument in a simple scenario to which virtually every reader can relate. Second, he selects areas of society that would be considered hot-buttons for debate. This enables readers to actively engage with The 3rd Alternative on both a professional and personal level.

Of course, not all problems are as easily resolved as the example of the music class. As expected, however, Covey lays out a clear, step-by-step method for achieving a 3rd Alternative that is at once specific enough to be applicable, but general enough to be realistic.

The Four Paradigms

The 3rd Alternative method is based on four paradigms — ways of thinking — that are completely different from the paradigms involved in 2-Alternative conflict and compromise.

The first paradigm is “I see my self.” In other words, writes Covey, the path to the 3rd Alternative begins with self-awareness. It requires you to search deep inside yourself to clearly be aware of your motives, uncertainties and biases. Those who practice 3rd Alternative thinking, writes Covey, say: “I have examined my own assumptions. I am ready to be authentic with you.” While 2-Alternative thinking begins with “I see my side,” 3rd Alternative switches to “I see my self — independent of my side.”

The second paradigm, according to Covey, is to accept and care for the other person in the conflict. In the traditional approach to conflict, people don’t see another “person,” they see the other “side.” They don’t see the opponent as a unique individual, but as a label of whatever the other side might be. In other words, the

paradigm “I stereotype you” describes what most people are doing when they look at opponents in a conflict.

Covey makes an important distinction in the second paradigm that is particularly applicable to business. His ideas appear to reinforce the shift to collaborative, or solutions-based, sales. Salespeople in many organizations have transitioned from a hunter/prey approach to accumulating business to learning to care for the sales prospect and to understand his or her unique needs. The switch from combat to collaboration resembles Covey’s paradigm to remove labels from the person on the other side of the bargaining table. This demonstrates one of several instances where, in lieu of a direct corollary, executives will need to interpret and apply Covey’s ideas to the business world.

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The third paradigm takes a new approach to the engagement of one party by the other. In the traditional 2-Alternative thinking, the opposing parties either refuse to listen to the other side or focus completely on defending themselves against that side. Third alternative thinkers, Covey writes, have a different approach: They actively want to engage the other person. In Covey’s words, “the best response to someone

who does not see things your way is to say, ‘You disagree? I need to listen to you!’”

The fourth paradigm is where the synergy between the two parties occurs. By this point, each party has a more honest perspective of who they are themselves — someone with biases and perceptions, not someone with all the right answers. Each side also has a realistic and complete appraisal of the other person as an unique individual and not just a representative of the other side. Finally, both parties have successfully sought out and understood the viewpoint of the other person. The stage is now set for finding a completely new solution, using the strengths of both sides, that neither of them had imagined before.

Start With the Question

Covey acknowledges that synergizing effectually is a challenge and he offers four steps to synergy. The first step is to ask, “Are you willing to go for a solution that is better than any of us have come up with yet?”

The next step is to define the criteria. In other words, Covey writes, the next question is: What would *better* look like? Specifically, what would a solution that delights both of us look like?

The third step is creating the 3rd Alternative. The criteria is set and now comes the hard work of finding this

3rd Alternative that meets the defined criteria and, therefore, leaves both sides delighted with the outcome. Creating the 3rd Alternative is not easy. It requires brainstorming new frameworks, thinking completely differently from the past and suspending judgment, at least for a while.

As an example of how a 3rd Alternative can be created, Covey describes a long-standing battle over the pesticide DDT. DDT was once used effectively in the fight against the deadly disease malaria, caused by the bite of a mosquito. Because of this pesticide, deaths from malaria plunged. However, environmentalists led by Rachel Carson revealed that DDT and other pesticides were causing significant long-term damage to the environment, and the pesticide was banned. The result was an immediate and disturbing increase in malaria deaths. Pro-DDT and anti-DDT forces passionately argued for their position: the pro-DDT side argued that the benefits of DDT outweighed the consequences. Anti-DDT forces argued that the pesticide was too dangerous and that the breed of mosquito that carried malaria was becoming immune to the pesticide anyway. As the conflict raged on, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation quietly brought together a diverse group of experts from many fields to find a 3rd Alternative for reducing malaria. The combined forces of the Gates team developed a number of radical solutions to the problem. In one case, a rocket scientist suggested using lasers to shoot the mosquitos down, optical engineers experimented with blue lasers from ordinary DVD players, programmers created software to guide the lasers and an inventor put it all together with parts acquired from eBay. “Harmless to humans and wildlife, the laser is so finely calibrated that it can spot a mosquito by its wing vibrations and bring it down with a tiny burst of light,” Covey writes. “Perimeter fences equipped with such lasers are capable of defending entire villages from malaria.”

The fourth step is the arrival at synergy. The solution is found. Excitement has replaced conflict. “How do we recognize the 3rd Alternative?” Covey asks. “It’s the one that meets our criteria of success. It does the job that needs to be done. It embodies the outcome we all want. It changes the game. It enables everyone to win.”

The 3rd Alternative at School

The template for achieving the 3rd Alternative that Covey offers can seem a bit optimistic. It’s one thing to write: “recognize your own biases,” “listen empathical-

ly” or even “create a 3rd Alternative.” It’s another to achieve these kinds of positives in situations of conflict wrought with tension, emotions, high stakes and perhaps even a visceral dislike of people on the opposing side.

Covey, however, did not become one of the world’s great thinkers on achievement and success by offering impractical pie-in-the-sky prescriptions that wouldn’t work in real life. The 3rd Alternative is packed with examples. The description of the 3rd Alternative and the detailed step-by-step implementation guide only occupy one chapter of the book. The bulk of the book is contained in the seven chapters that illustrate, with myriad real life examples, how the 3rd Alternative applies to work, home, school, law, society, world and life.

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The school chapter, for example, describes the familiar 2-Alternative debate over education in many countries. On one side of the debate are educators who believe that inequity — poverty, racism, dysfunctional families, low resources — are the cause of the problems in education. On the other side of the debate are what Covey labels generally as “business,” that is, those who believe that if education were run more as a business, the problems would be solved. The business side

of what Covey calls “the great debate” sees the educators themselves as a major problem.

Third alternative thinkers in this field, whether they are educators or business, work synergistically with others to find unique, never-before-seen solutions, Covey writes. Wendy Kopp, for example, founded an organization called Teach for America that recruits the best students from the best schools to spend two years teaching in disadvantaged schools before they start their careers.

Another example is A.R. Combs Elementary School, a magnet school in Raleigh, N.C. that was about to be shut down. It didn’t have many students, the facilities were in poor condition, the teachers were demoralized, the parents were unhappy, the students came from very disadvantaged socio-economic conditions — all the factors pointed to failure. Covey describes how principal Muriel Summers pleaded with the superintendent not to close the school. The superintendent relented but asked for a specific proposal from Summers on how she was going to attract more students. He gave her a week. Summers tells Covey, “We decided to send up a proposal to make a school like no other in the U.S.A. — the ideal school — and we had one week.”

Summers met with all of the stakeholders involved in the school, including parents and teachers, as well as

community and business leaders, and she asked them the 3rd Alternative question: What would our ideal school look like? Together, the stakeholders developed a new unifying mission for the school: to develop global leaders. Every decision and every action in the school would be driven by this mission to instill leadership skills in every student. Covey details the incredible results achieved by the school, including national awards. Today, the school is a model for what Covey calls “Leader in Me” schools across the country.

The Blackbird Mine Case

The chapter on the legal application of the 3rd Alternative is co-written by Larry Boyle, a former Justice of the Idaho Supreme Court, who offers his own experiences to help explain how Covey’s ideas can work in an arena that is designed to be adversarial. Boyle describes, for example, how he was called to mediate the Blackbird Mine case, a complex environmental case involving a cobalt mine that operated in the 1950s and 1960s. The mine was abandoned in the 1970s, but it left behind, in Boyle’s words, “a terrible stream of acid and metallic poison that was devastating to the land, water, and wildlife of the beautiful Salmon River wilderness.” He goes on to explain that “like a series of tipping dominoes, the state, private environmental groups, and a dozen federal agencies sued the mine owners and each other to force cleanup. A blizzard of claims and counterclaims flew.”

Boyle tried something new: He shut down the courtroom, sent all the interested parties to separate conference rooms and asked each of them to come up with a plan to settle the case. In two hours Boyle would receive the plans and, with the help of a leading scholar of environmental law named John Nagle, try to syner-

gize the plans. In the weeks and months that followed, the process was repeated several times. Within several months, the 10-year-old Blackbird Mine case was resolved without trial to the satisfaction of all.

The 3rd Alternative is not a beautiful starry-eyed theory on how the world could find solutions to problems if people would only “get along.” Covey uses his renowned communication skills built on illustrative metaphors and clean, step-by-step frameworks, combined with his years of experience working with 3rd Alternative leaders around the world, to write a book that offers a path to solutions in the future. Just as importantly, the 3rd Alternative reveals why certain

people are breaking through today with innovative solutions while others remain mired in contentious, never-ending battles.

Arianna Huffington, herself no stranger to conflict resolution in her role as president and editor-in-chief of the AOL Huffington Post Media Group, praised Covey for his commitment to exploring an alternative path to solutions. She writes that Covey is urging readers to look

beyond “suboptimal solutions.” This is perhaps the best endorsement for readers to pick up Covey’s book. Attempting to attack new problems using the same tired methods is certain to end in disappointment. Covey’s repeated description of people and organizations that found a better way will undoubtedly inspire readers to emulate the examples in this book and seek out their own 3rd Alternatives.

While it’s unlikely that *The 3rd Alternative* will achieve the game-changing significance of Covey’s book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, his new release will play its part in adding to Covey’s legacy of positive change in business and beyond. ●

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The author: Stephen R. Covey, Ph.D., is a renowned leadership authority, family expert, teacher, organizational consultant, and co-founder of FranklinCovey Co. He is the author of several international bestsellers, including *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which has sold more than 20 million copies. He was named one of *TIME* Magazine’s 25 Most Influential Americans. Covey holds the Jon M. Huntsman Presidential Chair in Leadership at the Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University.



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