

The 3rd Alternative by Stephen R Covey



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One of our roles as family business facilitators is to assist our clients work together more effectively. Key aspects of this include communicating more effectively on the tough subjects and reaching agreement on issues where there are diverse and often conflicting views.

Stephen Covey (of 7 Habits of Highly Effective People fame) addresses these issues in 'The 3rd Alternative'. This summary is not intend to replace reading the book itself, which we recommend to all. It is just an extract of the key points we have extracted from it that are applicable in the world of family business.

All people suffer adversities. Problems, whether physical or psychological are very real. This book is about meeting these challenges in a new way. p2

The 3rd Alternative - our way. Chap 2 p7

Most conflicts have two sides. Me v You

See-Do-Get

Paradigms influence what we see and that governs our behaviour.

- What we **see** influences what we **do**.
- What we do results in what we **get**.

The principle of synergy p12

My Way + Your Way = Our Way

2-alternative thinkers, view the world as – My Way v Your Way.

Often the suggested approach is to compromise. I won't get all that I want, but neither will you. To compromise means to concede, sacrifice, surrender which equals Lose - Lose p21

The Paradigms of Synergy p22

Four steps to 3rd Alternative thinking

- I see myself - self-awareness
- I see you - as a person not your position
- I seek you out - empathetic understanding
- I synergise with you

Paradigm 1 - I see myself p25

This does not mean – 'I see my side'. How we see things determines what we do, and what we do determines the results we get. P26

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We are more than the roles we play or our culture.
Don't take no for an answer, look for the 3rd alternative. P30

'The most important power we have is the power we have to help select the lens through which we see reality' David Brooks

We write our own script, so we can change it if we want to.

Questions to ask yourself if you are involved in conflict. P32

- What's my story? Do I need to change the script?
- Where might I have blind spots about myself?
- How has my cultural programming influenced my thinking?
- What are my real motives?
- Are my assumptions accurate?
- In what way are my assumptions incomplete?
- Am I contributing to an outcome (an end to the story) that I really want?

Paradigm 2 - I see you p33

See others as people not as things. Don't stereotype people - age, sex, race, politics, disability, nationality, 'our group'.

When I see you, I see an individual, not your side of the conflict. P39. I'm then more predisposed to understand you.

Paradigm 3 - I seek you out p40

Deliberately seek out conflicting views instead of avoiding or defending yourself against them. Adopt the attitude – *'You disagree? I need to listen to you.'* The best leaders don't deny or repress conflict. They use it as an opportunity to move forward.

The 3rd Alternative is counter intuitive. You put a high value on people who disagree with you instead of throwing up a defensive wall. *'I seek you out'* is the opposite of *'I defend myself against you'*.

Conflict is not a problem it's an opportunity.

Talking stick communication p44

Covey suggests using a prop, a Talking Stick' as a visual aid to help indicate who has the right to speak at a particular time.

It's not about winning arguments but about hearing the story P46.

Its essence is empathic listening. p48

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Definition of empathy - *when we find ourselves in the mind of the other. We observe reality through their eyes, feel their emotion, share in their pain.*

To listen empathetically **does not mean we agree** with the other person's point of view. It means that we **try to see their point of view**. Listening for both **content** and **emotion** expressed so that we can stand in their shoes and know what it feels like.

Empathetic listening is counter-intuitive. The natural response is to agree or disagree i.e. evaluate and comment from your own perspective. This is quite different from 'you see things differently from me, I need to listen to you.' It is based on Covey's 5th Habit – **Seek first to understand, then to be understood**.

Exercises - each person can speak only after they have stated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker, to that person's satisfaction. Capturing the words is one aspect, but to capture the feelings is tough.

Robust Decisions - 'the best possible choice is found by eliminating all the uncertainty possible.' p55. If you truly listen to understand all points of view you reduce uncertainty.

Process - when tensions are high and confidence is low

- **Go to the other side and say - 'we see things differently, I need to listen to you'**
- **Give your full attention.** Don't multi-task - don't judge, evaluate, analyse, advise, commiserate, critique or quarrel.
- **Be quiet.** Just sit back and listen. Don't feel you have to provide an answer, a solution or fix the problem for them.
- **Speak only to keep the flow going** - tell me more, go on...
- **Play close attention to emotions.** Affirm feelings - 'you must feel - sorry, angry, hurt, worn out, anxious, disappointed, baffled, confused, betrayed, unsure, suspicious, sceptical, worried, frustrated - about this'
- **Use a 'talking stick'** if it will help.
- **Remember you're listening to a story.** Just as if you are at a movie, you don't talk back
- **Be ready to learn.**
- **Make sure you really understand.** Tell the story back, restate what you heard, talk about feelings that you perceived. Do it to the other persons satisfaction

Show some gratitude. The person has opened themselves up to you. They've let you in.

Paradigm 4 - I Synergise with you p59

Go for a solution that is better than anyone thought of before. Synergy creates the 3rd alternative.

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The Process of Synergy p62

1. **Ask** 3rd alternative questions.
2. **Define** what success looks like
3. **Create** 3rd alternatives. Experiment with solutions until you
4. **Arrive** at synergy or the 3rd alternative

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

- What would better look like? A clear vision of the job to be done, a list of criteria for a successful outcome that would delight us both.
- Then experiment with possibilities.
- You know when you've arrived from the energy created.

Step 1 Ask the 3rd Alternative Question p65

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

I need to retrain my own thinking. It's about mutual respect, valuing differences and being open to possibilities you have not yet thought of. **It's not about compromising**, it's about working together to create something better than either party had in mind. In stressful or low trust relationships, the earlier step of listening to truly understand the other's perspective (seek first to understand) is an important prerequisite.

Step 2 Define the Criteria for Success p66

What does a great outcome look like? Who needs to be involved to make sure all aspects are covered? The objective is to look for an outcome where all can win. This goes beyond the principal of fairness.

Questions to ask when listing the criteria for success -

- Is everyone involved in setting the criteria? Are we getting as many ideas as possible?
- What outcomes do we really want?
- What outcomes would be a win for everyone?
- Are we looking beyond our entrenched positions to something better?

Step 3 Create 3rd Alternatives p72

It usually starts with one person who has the courage to tell a truth that really needs to be told.

Truth → Authenticity → Empathy → Synergy

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1. 'You see things differently. I need to listen to you.'
2. Once everyone feels heard you can ask 'are you willing to go for the 3rd alternative?'
3. If the answer is yes you can start experimenting with possible solutions.

Where does synergy come from? p75

Sometimes -

- combining elements from opposing ideas
- combining forces or leveraging opposing forces

Create a 'Magic Theatre' (a room for madmen) where all possibilities are on the table, where everyone can contribute and no idea is out of bounds. P79. Follow the rules of brainstorming (but go further) -

1. Play at it, it's a game, it's not for real.
2. Avoid closure.
3. Avoid judging others' ideas
4. Make models
5. Turn ideas on their heads
6. Work fast
7. Breed lots of ideas.

Step 4 Arrive at Synergy P82

We know we've arrived at the 3rd alternative by -

- The excitement in the room.
- When we are no longer interested in the old fights and assumptions. People become partners in discovery rather than enemies on the battlefield.
- The outcomes work - a quantum leap, or breakthrough not an incremental improvement

Worksheets 4 Steps to Synergy see pages after p88

The rest of the book looks at examples of the 3rd Alternative in action at work, at home and in other legal and social environments. We only briefly touch on some key points as they impact on family business.

Chap 3 The 3rd Alternative at Work p91

Note P108 Consultative Selling – creating a win/win.

P124 the innovative power of synergy. Set up teams with complementary talents and use technology to conquer distance.

P128 example of Lego working with hackers who had attacked their computer system to develop new products. It resulted from speaking to the hackers rather than suing

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them and created what the Lego director of community development Tormod Askildsen described as *'the platform for the 21st century.'*

Chap 4 The 3rd Alternative at Home p153

Treasuring the differences.

Use the **Stimulus <Freedom to Choose> → Response → Outcome** model

'A parent's real job is to raise children who can come up with their own 3rd Alternatives.' p175

Problem Solving

- 2nd Alternative method – hand out advise
- 3rd Alternative method – 'tell me more', draw the other person out, help them think it through

P179 H Wallace Goddard and James P Marshall, in their book 'The Marriage Garden.' made the comment that *'... based on years of experience, we think we know our partners (family members) completely'* Covey adds that – *'as a result we dismiss, avoid and close our ears to each other's stories.'* This frequently occurs in family business relationships?

P181 -- 'When it comes to relationships, **fast is slow and slow is fast'**

P194 – Covey gives the example of how a family court judge encouraged the parties to arrive at their own solutions. – *'I'll listen for a couple of hours and decide who I believe... then I'll make a decision about the future of your children. I don't love your children. I care for their welfare... but I don't love them as you do.'* Yet the judge is empowered to decide on the children's future. The message is, shouldn't those who love them be the people making these decisions.

P199 - 4 Steps to Synergy Worksheet

The next few chapters look at how 3rd Alternative thinking can be applied to social issues in education, the healthcare system, the law (alternative dispute resolution) and to address intentional political disputes.

Chap 5 The 3rd Alternative at School p202

Chap 6 The 3rd Alternative at Law p247

Chap 7 The 3rd Alternative in Society p281

Chap 8 The 3rd Alternative In the World p375

Chap 9 A 3rd Alternative Life

Like all change, old habits are hard to break. Covey cautions that in attempting to implement the lessons of the 3rd Alternative, we will find ourselves relapsing into old behaviours. *'We may start off with great intentions, but in the struggle to find ourselves*

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becoming defensive, hurt, reactive, falling back into old patterns of "fight or flight" communication. These things need not indicate failure at all, but rather that we need to do more work inside our souls and develop greater strength in the 'muscle' of our character.'

Chap 10 Inside Out

Success as a 3rd Alternative thinker comes from the inside out. Covey recommends 20 things that he's found helpful in developing the inner strength to create 3rd alternative solutions -

1. **Beware of pride**, let go of needing to always be "right"
2. **Learn to say 'I'm sorry'** – do it quickly, do it sincerely and don't go half way. Take responsibility and express your desire to understand
3. **Be quick to forgive perceived slights** - you choose whether or not to be offended
4. **Make and keep very small promises to yourself and others.** Create a pattern of doing so, make and keep bigger promises as keeping promises to yourself help to build integrity
5. **Spend time in nature** - create space in your life every day for reflection about the world around you
6. **Read widely** - it's a way to make mental connections and get new insights
7. **Exercise often and eat healthy** - the body is the instrument of the mind and spirit
8. **Get enough sleep** - the brain grows new connections as we sleep
9. **Study inspiring literature** - ponder and meditate, insights will come
10. **Make quiet time for yourself** - to think through creative solutions
11. **Express love and appreciation** - listen empathically. Devote time to learning about other people, their story and what's important to them
12. **You have two ears and one mouth; use them proportionally**
13. **Practice being generous with others** - with your time, your heart, your forgiveness. Be generous with and forgive yourself.
14. **Avoid comparing yourself with others** - be true to yourself
15. **Be grateful.** Express it.
16. **Learn to become enthusiastically relentless about discovering how to create great wins for others**
17. **When things aren't going well, take a break** - take a walk, get a good night's sleep and come back with a fresh perspective
18. **If you truly can't reach win-win, remember that "no deal" in some cases is the best alternative**
19. **When it comes to other people, their reactions, their weaknesses and peculiarities, just smile a lot**
20. **Never stop believing in the possibility of the 3rd Alternative**

The 3rd Alternative was Stephen Covey's final book and was published in 2011 just prior to his death in 2012.

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