



The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah: A Comparative Ethical Analysis

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Abstract

Stephen R. Covey's influential work, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, presents a framework grounded in universal principles of effectiveness, including responsibility, vision, prioritization, mutual benefit, empathetic communication, creative cooperation, and continuous self-renewal. While Covey's model is formulated from a secular and managerial perspective, this paper explores the striking parallels between these habits and the ethical-spiritual foundations of Islam. By critically analyzing each habit in the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the study highlights how Islamic teachings not only align with but also provide a deeper moral and spiritual dimension to Covey's principles. For instance, the Qur'anic concept of accountability before Allah strengthens the idea of personal responsibility, while the Prophetic model of *shūrā* (consultation) enriches the principle of cooperative synergy. Similarly, the prioritization of faith and values over worldly pursuits reflects a more holistic understanding of "putting first things first." Through this comparative approach, the paper demonstrates that the Islamic worldview presents a comprehensive paradigm of effectiveness, where personal growth is inseparable from spiritual consciousness, social responsibility, and ethical conduct. The study concludes that integrating Covey's habits with Qur'anic and Prophetic guidance offers a balanced framework that combines modern productivity strategies with timeless Islamic principles, thus fostering both individual excellence and collective well-being.

Keywords:

Effectiveness, Islamic Leadership, Self-Development, Qur'an, Sunnah, Stephen Covey, Seven Habits, Prophetic Model, Personal Growth, Spiritual Intelligence, Tazkiyah, Islamic Ethics.

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Introduction:

The pursuit of personal excellence, effective leadership, and moral character has remained a central theme in both religious and secular paradigms of success. Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has provided millions of readers with a structured model for achieving success through principled living. Each of Covey's habits represents a shift in character, behavior, and worldview. While the book is not written from a religious perspective, the framework aligns closely with Islamic teachings which emphasize inner transformation (*tazkiyah*), ethical conduct (*akhlaq*), and spiritual accountability (*taqwa*).

Islam, as a complete way of life (*deen*), outlines principles of personal development that are not only pragmatic but divinely inspired. The Qur'an repeatedly calls believers to think, reflect, prioritize, and act for the betterment of self and society. The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides a practical model of an effective human being who was spiritually elevated, intellectually brilliant, emotionally intelligent, and socially transformative.¹

This paper explores how each of Covey's habits corresponds to teachings from the Qur'an and Sunnah and demonstrates that a Muslim seeking effectiveness should ground their development in Islamic spirituality, ethics, and divine purpose.

Habit 1: Be Proactive:

Stephen Covey begins his framework of personal transformation with the foundational habit of **being proactive**. This habit calls individuals to take initiative, assume responsibility for their lives, and exercise the ability to choose their responses rather than being reactive to circumstances or external conditions. According to Covey, "Proactive people recognize that responsibility ('response-ability') is the ability to choose their response."² This principle is not merely about action, but about inner freedom, character strength, and moral agency—concepts that resonate deeply with Islamic teachings.

The Islamic Worldview on Responsibility

In Islam, human beings are seen as **vicegerents (khulafa')** on Earth, entrusted with free will, moral responsibility, and accountability before Allah. The Qur'an emphasizes this role in several places:

"Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."³

This verse highlights personal responsibility as a prerequisite for societal transformation. Change begins not with external factors, but with internal will and initiative—this is the essence of proactivity. The Qur'anic narrative frequently contrasts between those who take moral initiative and those who follow their desires or societal trends blindly.

Another significant verse states:

"And say, 'The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve.'"⁴

Here, the Qur'an reaffirms that belief and disbelief are acts of volition. Islam holds every person accountable for their choices because Allah has endowed human beings with reason (*'aql*) and will (*irada*).

The Prophetic Model of Proactivity

The life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides a practical and profound example of proactivity. In the early Makkan period, despite oppression, ridicule, and loss, the Prophet never surrendered to despair or helplessness. He actively sought new strategies: approaching different tribes, migrating to Ta'if, building coalitions in Medina, and constantly engaging in da'wah with wisdom and resilience.

A powerful Prophetic saying confirms the proactive mindset:

"The strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, while there is good in both. Strive for that which benefits you, seek help from Allah, and do not become

helpless. If anything befalls you, do not say, ‘If only I had done this,’ but say, ‘Qaddar Allah wa ma sha’a fa’al (It is the decree of Allah, and He does what He wills).’”⁵

This Hadith encourages a three-step proactive approach: (1) pursue benefit, (2) rely on Allah, and (3) accept outcomes with contentment. The believer is never passive—rather, he or she is engaged, striving, and inwardly free from defeatism.

Islamic Psychological Insights

Contemporary Islamic scholars like **Imam al-Ghazali** emphasized the centrality of intention (*niyyah*), will (*irada*), and action (*‘amal*) in self-transformation. In *Ihya ‘Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali identifies the *qalb* (heart) as the seat of moral decision-making, and that transformation begins with inner intention and focus.⁶

Similarly, **Maulana Abul A‘la Maududi**, in his *Tafhim al-Qur’an*, interpreted *tazkiyah nafs* (purification of the soul) as a dynamic process where the believer must continuously choose self-discipline and resist internal and external forces of corruption.⁷ This choicefulness is at the core of what Covey would call proactivity.

Reactive vs. Proactive in Qur’anic Narratives

Many Qur’anic figures illustrate the contrast between reactive and proactive behavior. For example:

Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was proactive even in prison: interpreting dreams, managing crises, and maintaining moral integrity despite being wrongfully imprisoned.⁸

- In contrast, **Pharaoh’s reactionary behavior** was driven by fear, pride, and short-term gain, leading to his eventual destruction.⁹

Thus, proactivity in the Islamic worldview is tied not just to personal success but to fulfilling divine purpose.

The principle of **being proactive** is deeply embedded in Islamic teachings. From the Qur’an’s emphasis on moral choice and accountability to the Prophet’s active engagement in the face of adversity, Islam commands believers to act intentionally, rely on Allah, and take initiative. Proactivity is not simply a tool for worldly effectiveness—it is a spiritual obligation tied to one’s accountability in the Hereafter. Covey’s first habit finds a powerful counterpart in the Islamic ideal of an *active, responsible, and God-conscious human being*.

Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind

The second habit in Covey’s framework emphasizes envisioning a clear sense of purpose and destination in life before engaging in daily tasks. Covey encourages individuals to develop a **“personal mission statement”** and to shape their actions by values rather than social pressures or momentary desires.¹⁰ This habit is built on the principle that meaningful lives are guided by long-term vision and moral conviction rather than short-term reaction.

Islam affirms this notion with far greater emphasis by giving the human being an eternal end—the **Hereafter** (*Akhirah*)—and defining human purpose as *ibadah* (worship and servitude to Allah). All Islamic ethical, social, and spiritual goals are rooted in the consciousness of this end.

The Qur’anic Vision of Life’s Purpose

The Qur’an provides a clear and unequivocal definition of the human purpose:

“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”¹¹

This verse not only articulates the metaphysical end for human existence but also acts as a foundation upon which Muslims build their intentions and life goals. Worship in Islam (*ibadah*) is not confined to rituals but includes all actions done with the intention of seeking Allah’s pleasure.

Moreover, Allah commands:

“Say, ‘Indeed, my prayer, my rites of sacrifice, my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds.’”¹²

Here, the believer is instructed to orient the entirety of life—both sacred and mundane—toward divine devotion. This creates a framework in which every decision and priority is measured in light of the final destination: **the meeting with Allah**.

Prophetic Teaching on Intention

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established the principle of purposefulness through intention (*niyyah*):

“Actions are judged by intentions, and each person will receive according to what they intended.”¹³

This Hadith, considered the foundation of Islamic ethics by Imam al-Shafi‘i and others, teaches that inner purpose is what gives meaning and moral value to external action.¹⁴ Starting with the end in mind, therefore, is deeply connected with having a **sincere and correct intention** (*ikhlas al-niyyah*).

Moreover, the Prophet ﷺ encouraged believers to **consciously plan for the Hereafter**, as seen in his exhortation:

“Be in this world as though you were a stranger or a traveler.”¹⁵

This perspective naturally urges the believer to think beyond immediate gain and focus on the eternal consequence of actions.

Islamic Ethics and Goal Setting

In Islamic thought, *maqasid* (objectives) play a crucial role in legal theory and personal behavior. Classical scholars like **Imam al-Shatibi** articulated the *Maqasid al-Shariah*—the higher goals of Islamic law—which include the preservation of religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property.¹⁶ A Muslim is encouraged to organize their personal and social life in ways that fulfill these higher objectives. This naturally instills **purpose-driven behavior** consistent with the Qur’anic command to act with foresight and accountability.

As Dr. Israr Ahmed noted, the Islamic model of human life is **not circular but linear**—it begins in the womb and ends in the Hereafter. Hence, any meaningful Islamic framework of effectiveness must begin with *akhira-centric* consciousness.¹⁷

Case Studies from Qur’anic Narratives

The lives of the Prophets offer practical illustrations of beginning with the end in mind. For example:

- **Prophet Nuh (Noah)** spent 950 years preaching a message that bore little fruit in worldly terms but remained consistent with his divine mission.¹⁸
- **Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham)** was willing to sacrifice his son, leave his homeland, and challenge tyrants—all because his actions were oriented toward pleasing Allah.¹⁹
- **Prophet Muhammad** ﷺ endured persecution in Makkah with patience because his vision was not short-term triumph but the long-term establishment of *tawhid* and the completion of divine guidance.²⁰

These examples demonstrate how **purpose-driven living**, with the Hereafter as the ultimate destination, defines Islamic spirituality and action.

Covey’s concept of “beginning with the end in mind” finds a richer, deeper parallel in Islamic teachings. Islam not only encourages foresight and planning but defines the highest “end” as nearness to Allah and success in the Hereafter. This provides the believer with a profound sense of purpose that transcends material ambition. From the Qur’anic framework to the Prophetic model, Islam presents a spiritually grounded and morally clear methodology for orienting life with a higher aim.

Habit 3: Put First Things First — Prioritization and Time Management in Islam

Stephen Covey’s third habit, *Put First Things First*, builds on the principle of purpose (Habit 2) by urging individuals to manage their time and energy according to what matters most. In Islam, this concept is strongly embedded in the prioritization of deeds, obligations, and time.

Covey's third habit, "Put First Things First," focuses on effective time management and aligning one's daily actions with long-term values and goals. In the Islamic worldview, prioritizing duties is an essential aspect of faith, particularly when distinguishing between *fard* (obligatory) and *nafl* (supererogatory) deeds. The Qur'an frequently urges believers to uphold prayer and righteous conduct as first-order priorities in life:

"Establish prayer, for prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds."²¹

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized this principle in several hadiths. For instance, when Mu'adh ibn Jabal was sent to Yemen, he was instructed to begin with the essentials of tawhīd, followed by prayer, zakat, and then other responsibilities.²² This reflects a strategic approach to establishing what matters most.

Ibn al-Qayyim explains that time is a person's true capital, and wasting it on lesser priorities leads to spiritual and worldly loss.²³ This aligns with Covey's concept of focusing on "Quadrant II" activities—important but not urgent tasks.

In Islam, placing the Hereafter above this world is the ultimate manifestation of "putting first things first":

"But you prefer the worldly life, while the Hereafter is better and more enduring."²⁴

Time is one of the most precious resources entrusted to human beings. The Qur'an makes a solemn oath by time:

"By time, indeed, mankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds..."²⁵

This verse highlights the urgency of using time wisely. Wasting time is viewed in Islam as wasting an opportunity to fulfill one's purpose and prepare for the Hereafter.

Prioritization in Islamic Law

Islamic teachings prioritize acts of worship, moral obligations, and responsibilities toward others in an organized and purposeful way. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ demonstrated this in his own daily life, giving priority to obligatory prayers (*fard*), family responsibilities, public duties, and voluntary worship (*nafl*).

"Part of someone's being a good Muslim is his leaving alone that which does not concern him."²⁶

This hadith underlines the need to avoid distractions and remain focused on meaningful actions.

Balancing Worldly and Spiritual Obligations

Covey emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between "urgent" and "important" tasks. Islam promotes the same idea by distinguishing between *fard* (obligatory), *sunnah* (recommended), *mubah* (permissible), and *makruh* (discouraged) actions. By following this categorization, a Muslim prioritizes what is most pleasing to Allah over what is merely urgent or popular.

Habit 4: Think Win-Win — Mutual Benefit and Justice in Islam

Stephen Covey's fourth habit, *Think Win-Win*, promotes an attitude of mutual respect, benefit, and fairness in interpersonal relationships. In Islamic teachings, this principle is rooted deeply in the values of justice (*‘adl*), equity (*qist*), brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*), and benevolence (*ihsan*), forming the foundation for all social and economic dealings.

The Principle of Justice in the Qur'an

Islam commands believers to uphold justice even when it may be against personal interest:

"O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives..."²⁷

Justice is not only a legal principle in Islam but a spiritual imperative that shapes a Muslim's mindset. Justice in Islam is not limited to the courtroom; it extends to everyday interactions—whether in trade, dialogue, or family matters.

Win-Win in Trade and Social Conduct

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ practiced and encouraged fairness and mutual benefit in all his dealings. He said:

"May Allah have mercy on a man who is lenient when he sells, when he buys, and when he demands back his money."²⁸

This hadith reflects the essence of the *win-win* principle—where both parties in a transaction are treated with respect, and each comes away with a sense of gain and fairness.

Brotherhood and Cooperative Spirit

The Qur'an encourages believers to view one another as brothers and sisters, promoting cooperation over competition:

"The believers are but brothers, so make peace between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy."²⁹

This worldview aligns with Covey's vision of abundance—where cooperation does not diminish one's success but enhances collective well-being.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood — Listening and Empathy in the Sunnah

Stephen Covey's fifth habit emphasizes *empathetic listening*—the ability to understand others before attempting to communicate one's own point of view. In Islam, this principle is deeply embedded in the prophetic model, which stresses active listening (*sama'*), patience (*sabr*), and emotional intelligence (*fahm* and *rahmah*) in interpersonal communication.

The Listening Nature of the Prophet ﷺ

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is described in the Qur'an as someone who listened attentively and patiently even to those who were hostile:

"Among them are those who hurt the Prophet and say, 'He is [all] ear.' Say, '[It is] an ear of goodness for you..'"³⁰

This verse alludes to the Prophet's ability to attentively listen to people's concerns—an essential trait of empathetic leadership.

Practice of Empathy in Sunnah

The Prophet ﷺ would not interrupt others while they were speaking. He would listen fully and respond with wisdom and kindness. Anas ibn Malik (RA) reported:

"I served the Messenger of Allah ﷺ for ten years. Not once did he say to me, 'Uff', nor did he ever say to me concerning anything I had done, 'Why did you do that?'"³¹

This exemplifies the Prophet's patience and his attentiveness to the emotional state of others.

Consultation and Mutual Understanding (Shura)

Islam encourages consultation (*shura*) as a means to ensure all voices are heard before making a decision:

"...consult with them in affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah..."³²

Seeking to understand others' perspectives is a prerequisite to effective consultation. Thus, Habit 5 finds strong resonance in the Islamic model of leadership and family life.

Habit 6: Synergize — Collaboration and Unity in the Qur'an

Covey's sixth habit—*Synergize*—is about valuing diversity and working cooperatively to achieve more together than separately. This principle aligns closely with Islamic teachings on unity (*wahda*), cooperation (*ta'awun*), and the communal nature of righteousness and progress.

Cooperation in Righteousness

The Qur'an explicitly commands believers to work together in virtue:

“Cooperate with one another in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.”³³

This divine instruction supports the idea of building synergy through collective moral action. Working together with mutual respect and shared goals is not just encouraged—it is mandated in Islam.

Complementary Roles of the Ummah

The Qur’an describes the Muslim community as a unified body with complementary roles:

“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided...”³⁴

Unity and collaboration are seen as safeguards against division and as mechanisms for achieving collective success. The Prophet ﷺ likened the believers to a solid structure:

“The believers are like a building, each part strengthening the other.”³⁵

This analogy illustrates the concept of synergy—where unity produces strength that individual components alone cannot achieve.

Shura (Mutual Consultation) as a Tool of Synergy

The Prophet ﷺ actively engaged his companions in consultation (*shura*) and decision-making. This participatory leadership fostered a strong sense of communal responsibility and synergy. Even when divine guidance was available, the Prophet ﷺ still valued others’ input, as seen in the events of Badr and Uhud.

Thus, Habit 6 reflects Islamic principles that call for working together through respectful dialogue, shared values, and mutual reinforcement.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw — Renewal in the Light of Islam

Stephen Covey’s seventh habit, *Sharpen the Saw*, refers to regular renewal in four key areas of life: physical, mental, emotional/social, and spiritual. This aligns profoundly with the Islamic vision of holistic well-being (*sihhat*, ‘*aql*, *nafs*, and *ruh*), which stresses the balance between body, mind, heart, and soul.

Physical Renewal: Health and Cleanliness

Islam strongly emphasizes physical care through cleanliness, nutrition, and moderation. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

“Your body has a right over you.”³⁶

Muslims are encouraged to engage in moderate exercise, eat lawful and healthy food, and maintain hygiene. Wudu (ablution) five times daily is a spiritual practice that also renews the body physically.

8.2 Mental Renewal: Knowledge and Reflection

Learning is a continual process in Islam. The first revealed word in the Qur’an was:

“Read in the name of your Lord who created.”³⁷

Seeking knowledge (‘*ilm*) is considered a lifelong duty. The Prophet ﷺ stated:

“Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.”³⁸

Mental sharpening through reading, reflection (*tafakkur*), and study is part of a Muslim’s ongoing renewal.

Emotional and Social Renewal: Relationships and Gratitude

Islam focuses heavily on maintaining healthy social relations through compassion (*rahmah*), forgiveness, and gratitude. The Qur’an instructs:

“Repel evil with that which is better; then the one you were at enmity with will become as though a devoted friend.”³⁹

Emotional renewal is achieved through prayer, family ties, charity, and kindness—values that maintain emotional resilience and social harmony.

Spiritual Renewal: Worship and Dhikr

Above all, Islam prioritizes *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul). Daily prayers, fasting, recitation of the Qur’an, and remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) act as spiritual nourishment.

“Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.”⁴⁰

This is the deepest form of "sharpening the saw"—restoring one's inner clarity and closeness to God.

Conclusion: Integrating the 7 Habits Through an Islamic Lens

Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is celebrated for its universal principles of effectiveness and personal growth. When examined through the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah, it becomes evident that these habits are not only compatible with Islamic teachings—they are deeply rooted within them.

Each of the seven habits finds a profound reflection in Islamic values:

1. **Be Proactive** — The Qur'an urges believers to take initiative and responsibility, exemplified in the concept of *ijtihad* and *'amal salih*.
2. **Begin with the End in Mind** — The idea of intentionality (*niyyah*) and consciousness of the Hereafter (*akhirah*) forms the core of a Muslim's vision.
3. **Put First Things First** — Prioritization of worship (*'ibadah*), obligations, and moral action echoes Islamic ethics.
4. **Think Win-Win** — Justice, equity, and brotherhood as taught by the Prophet ﷺ promote mutually beneficial relationships.
5. **Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood** — Islamic teachings emphasize listening, empathy (*shura*, *husn al-dhann*) and mutual consultation.
6. **Synergize** — The value of unity (*ittihad*), teamwork (*jama'ah*), and collective responsibility reinforces this habit.
7. **Sharpen the Saw** — Islam encourages the renewal of the body, mind, heart, and soul through worship, learning, and reflection.

Thus, the 7 Habits align with the Islamic worldview of *tazkiyah* (self-purification), *ihsan* (excellence), and *falāḥ* (success). A Muslim who seeks personal and collective effectiveness can find in these habits a powerful framework—already embedded in their faith tradition.

Ultimately, the integration of modern personal development with Qur'anic and Prophetic principles can create not only effective individuals but morally grounded, spiritually enriched, and socially responsible human beings.

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