



## marketing minute

**Five Habits of Successful Physicians** What separates physicians who thrive from those who only survive? According to Confucius...and authors such as Steven Covey...it may be simply their habits.

BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



The Chinese philosopher Confucius is attributed with saying, "Men's natures are alike; it is their habits that carry them far apart." Certainly, Stephen Covey would agree. Have you ever wondered what are the '7 habits of highly effective people' that have made Stephen Covey such a success himself? In case you have not read one of the 10 million copies in print of Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the habits he advocates are listed below:

- *Be proactive.*
- *Begin with the end in mind.*
- *Put first things first.*
- *Think win win.*
- *Seek first to understand and then to be understood.*
- *Synergize.*
- *Sharpen the saw.*

On the other hand, there are bad habits that are sure

to lead to personal and professional failure. And, these are detailed in the new book *The 12 Bad Habits That Hold Good People Back* by authors James Waldroop and Timothy Butler (the back cover touts that it is the "flip side to Stephen Covey's approach"). In summary, with a little paraphrasing, the habits you don't want to

have are:

- *Never feeling good enough.*
- *Seeing the world in black and white.*
- *Doing too much, pushing too hard.*
- *Avoiding conflict at any cost.*
- *Running roughshod over the opposition.*
- *Acting like a rebel looking for a cause.*
- *Always swinging for the fence.*
- *Being afraid to make changes.*
- *Not recognizing your own or others' emotions.*
- *Constantly seeking to climb*

**A high energy level is one of the most critical factors for career success. But, it is hard to remain energetic on a lousy diet, too little sleep, too much stress and irregular exercise.**

*the next rung on the ladder.*

- *Lacking a sense of boundaries.*
- *Losing the path.*

If Confucius is right—we all are similar in nature and what separates those of us who thrive from those of us who don't is our habits—then what habits will help us to achieve our goals in medicine? In an effort to extrapolate common business principles to the health-care industry, I set out to determine the 5 habits (for the sake of brevity) of successful physicians.

Before I start, it is important to note that *Webster's Dictionary* defines a habit as a “tendency toward an action or condition, which by repetition has become involuntary.” If taken literally, this differs somewhat from the behaviors presented in the books mentioned above. As with those books, the habits I will be describing here are more all encompassing with an emphasis on what successful doctors routinely do.

**Habit #1: Remember your mission.**

In the words of concentration camp victim Viktor Frankl, “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life. Everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, or can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.” In order to fulfill your mission, it is important to never forget why you became a doctor. For most of us, becoming a doctor had more to do with helping people in their time of need than anything else. Long hours, monetary cutbacks, too much paperwork,

and impatient patients can dim this memory. But keeping your personal healing mission at the forefront is critical if you are to have a meaningful and thriving medical career.

**Habit #2: Set realistic goals.**

For many people, regardless of whether they are physicians, setting goals is not a routine or formal activity. But if you ask a group of successful business executives how they got where they are today, they will invariably tell you that they had a plan, that their plan changed over time, then they adjusted their sights and once again continued along the path toward their goals. If you really want to get somewhere, it is important to know your goal and to also decide which path you need to travel to achieve it. Along the way, there will invariably be some challenges, but these “bumps” can often be turned into exciting new adventures if you are open to changing your course a bit as you go. A good example of a man with goals and the dedication to achieve his goals despite his share of misfortunes is Jim Marshall. Marshall played professional football as a defensive end until the “old” age of forty-two. The famous quarterback, Fran Tarkenton, once called Marshall “the most amazing athlete I've ever known in any sport.” Marshall started in 282 consecutive football games. He did this in spite of once being caught in a blizzard in which all of his companions died, and another time suffering a gunshot wound while cleaning a rifle. Your goals will lead you to where you want to go—but first you have to determine what they are.

**Habit #3: Develop a niche or unique expertise.**

Everyone's life and career takes on new meaning when they develop expertise in a certain area. Yet, in medicine today, doctors can be made to feel like assembly line workers—without special skills and easily replaced. People who stand out, even among their peers, are those who develop a niche. In the fascinating book, *Built to Last—Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* by James Collins and Jerry Porras, the authors suggest that one should “try a lot of stuff and keep what works.” In a chapter with this as the title, Collins and Porras describe several companies that inadvertently found their niches through some surprising mishaps and events. For example, in 1890 Johnson & Johnson was primarily a supplier of antiseptic gauze and medical plasters. When they received a letter from a physician who complained about patient skin irritation from certain medicated plasters, Fred Kilmer, the company's director of research, convinced the company to include a small can of talc as part of the standard package with certain products. Collins and Porras write, “To the company's surprise, customers soon began asking to buy more of the talc directly! According to J&J's own official history, ‘the Johnsons got into the baby powder business quite by accident.’” In medicine there are a lot of different practice environments and other variables that can help to shape your niche.

**Habit #4: Practice what you preach.**

This is a tough one for many of us. Do you tell people to exercise regularly, eat properly, reduce stress, and go for annual check-ups? Do you do this yourself? In the employee handbook *New Work Habits for the Next Millennium*, author Price

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Pritchett advises readers to “manage your energy level.” Pritchett notes that a high energy level is one of the most critical factors for career success. But it is hard to remain energetic on a lousy diet, too little sleep, too much stress, and irregular exercise. So take your own advice and see what happens!

### **Habit #5: Allow yourself to make mistakes.**

In medicine, physicians are not allowed to make mistakes. At least not very big ones. Of course, we all need to adhere to the “first do no harm” rule, but the fact is that we will make mistakes with our patients, colleagues, and loved ones along the way. Perhaps it is of some comfort that we are not alone in our chosen careers that allow little margin for error. For example, my good friend Janie is an engineer who designs rockets. Obviously this, too, is a job where the margin for error is minimal. As Robert W. Johnson (founder of Johnson & Johnson) once said, “If I wasn’t making mistakes, I wasn’t making decisions.” If you are compassionate and competent, your mistakes will pale in comparison to your successes. If you don’t believe me, just think of Babe Ruth, the one-time greatest home-run hitter who ever lived. Did you know that he also held the record for strikeouts at 1,330 times?

Developing professional habits can help us to accomplish our career goals and to thrive in an ever-changing health-care environment. Of course there are probably at least a dozen more habits that we could incorporate, but this is a start. ■

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