

Dr. Seuss Explains Covey Leadership Principles

Puanani Mateaki

May 7, 2004

LI805XU Organization Theories for Administering Information Agencies

Rich Wilson



Using literature or stories help to teach principles. Stories give abstract principles life. Stories provide concrete examples so desired behavior can be identified and implemented. Stories also make principles memorable.

Boyd K. Packer's teaching manual used to instruct religious youth teachers supports using stories to illustrate the intangible. He writes about teaching faith, "We can tell stories about people and their actions that demonstrate faith." Packer also adds, "Stories can be used effectively to interest a class and teach them." Finding effective tools to teach quality management is essential. Sometimes what is taught is as important as how it is taught. Using stories to teach effective business practice is a fantastic way to model and teach effective presentation skills, a critical component of business or organization success.

Stephen R. Covey is an organization and business guru. He is an internationally renowned leadership authority. He worked as a business management and organizational behavior professor for twenty years. He then created the Covey Leadership Center and helps individuals and organizations in the private sector increase productivity. He is an accomplished speaker and author and travels widely consulting businesses and organizations.

Many Covey leadership principles include intangible ideas like faith, humility, and integrity. Theodor Seuss Geisel or "Dr. Seuss," penned many seemingly simple stories that actually contain important life lessons. His stories can illustrate Covey leadership principles.

Dr. Seuss wrote stories with agendas. They were not just entertaining tales. Seuss readers can learn effective business practices by reading deeper. His stories are simple and loved by children worldwide but the simplicity also makes the principles he advocates clear. His positions are consistent with Covey. As an added benefit Seuss tales are filled with rhyme making his stories and the principles taught therein easy to remember.

An example of this is the widely popular *Green Eggs and Ham*. Sam I am is the positive perky

character who relentlessly tries to get the other unnamed character to eat green eggs and ham. Initially the other character has a negative attitude when he first meets Sam I am. His immediate reaction before Sam ever speaks to him is to state “That Sam I am, that Sam I am. I do not like that Sam I am.”

This can be compared to employee resistance to new leadership and or change. Covey advises leaders to actively work with people to institute programs or policies. Covey maintains real commitment is essential and worth the extra effort to secure.

Sam I am works hard for commitment. He is undaunted despite repeated refusals to eat green eggs and ham. He offers alternatives to adopt the “eating green eggs and ham policy.” Each time Sam I am offers a new choice he smiles widely exhibiting perpetual enthusiasm for committing his new friend to eat.

Finally after several refusals Sam I am commits the character to try the policy or eat green eggs and ham. After giving the policy a chance or eating the green eggs and ham the character is changed. The story ends with him smiling and thanking Sam I am for introducing him to green eggs and ham. His arm is around Sam I am's shoulders and it is clear he is committed or converted to the benefits of eating green eggs and ham.

One of Covey's books *Principle-Centered Leadership* contains the chapter Involving People in the Problem. He writes, “Involvement is the key to implementing change and increasing commitment. We tend to be more interested in our own ideas than in those of others. If we are not involved, we will likely resist change.” Sam I am involves the other character in the policy. He exhausts possible solutions then discovers an effective way to gain commitment.

Covey explains an effective decision incorporates both quality and commitment. He quantifies it by explaining an example that “by involving others, we compromise the quality of that decision (it drops from 10 down to 7), but we increase the commitment to it (let's say from 2 to 8).” In this example Covey recognizes although the decision quality has dropped, the net gain is almost three times as much

or quality 10 X commitment 2 = 20 compared to quality 7 X commitment 8 = 56. *Green Eggs and Ham* is a great story to illustrate this principle. It is also a wonderful example of a WIN/WIN outcome Covey advocates in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Other Seuss stories illustrate Covey principles. Covey states the “solution” is to focus on natural principles. Covey identifies the law of the farm as enduring over time because it adheres to principles that operate regardless of our awareness of these or our obedience to these. Covey writes, “I must prepare the ground, put in the seed, cultivate it, weed it, water it, then gradually nurture growth and development to full maturity.” He compares these principles to any problem or concern with a marriage, organization, or child. He emphasizes that in any of these areas there is no quick fix. Positive mental attitudes and a bunch of success formulas will not compensate for consistent positive action and work over a long period of time. Covey makes the following statement that incorporates this belief, “To value oneself and, at the same time, subordinate oneself to higher purposes and principles is the paradoxical essence of highest humanity and the foundation of basic leadership.”

King Derwin provides an appropriate example of the importance of respecting and adhering to natural laws in *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*. Derwin is dissatisfied with what comes down from the sky or namely the snow, rain, fog, and sunshine. Derwin's page Bartholomew tries to warn King Derwin against trying to change the natural law or things that normally come down from the sky but Derwin ignores what Bartholomew says to him. Derwin gathers his magicians and tells them he wants something else to come down from the sky.

The magicians agree to give the king Oobleck. At first Derwin is delighted to have something different fall from the sky. Later the king discovers Oobleck is not just green it is also extremely sticky and makes a mess of his entire kingdom. The palace bell cannot be rung because it is filled with Oobleck and Oobleck has paralyzed farmers and others in his kingdom. Bartholomew describes dozens of people including his friends “flopping and floundering in the goo.”

In the throne room Bartholomew finds the king. This is how he is described in the book, “His royal crown was stuck to his royal head. The seat of his royal pants was stuck to his royal throne. Oobleck was dripping from his eyebrows. It was oozing into his royal ears.” The king wants Bartholomew to fetch the magicians to stop the Oobleck from falling but Bartholomew reminds the king he is unable to get them as he will just get stuck in the Oobleck on the way.

Derwin decides he needs to find magic words to say so the Oobleck will be stopped. Bartholomew suggests the king admit his mistake by saying he is sorry. Derwin at first resists this idea but then in desperation decides to own up to his own mistake and say how sorry he is for bringing the Oobleck to his kingdom. The “magic words” uttered by Derwin are “I’m sorry” and the Oobleck magically disappears when the king says the words.

Following his Oobleck adventure the king is very grateful for what naturally falls from the sky. He is led by his page Bartholomew to the now Oobleck-free bell tower and rings the bell declaring it a national holiday to honor the four “perfect things that fall from the sky.” The story ends with the following, “The King now knew that these four old-fashioned things...the rain, the sunshine, the fog, and the snow...were good enough for any king in the world, especially for him, old King Derwin of Didd.”

*Bartholomew and the Ooblek* is a story that clearly shows the mayhem resulting from trying to ignore natural irrefutable laws and principles. There is no getting around natural laws and principles. Covey advises people to embrace and strengthen these and resist trying to attain the quick-fixes that lack the work to back them up.

One of these natural principles Covey advocates is integrity. Integrity breeds trust in employees. Leaders with integrity are more effective because of this trust. Covey recognizes although it is easy to “work on personalities” it's more difficult to change those characteristics that are a true sign of integrity and maturity. He states it is hard to change habits, develop virtues, learn basic disciplines, keep

promises, be faithful to vows, exercise courage, or be genuinely considerate of the feelings and convictions of others. Seuss gives an example of integrity in *Horton Hatches the Egg*.

The story begins with a lazy bird named Mayzie who is sitting on her egg hoping to find someone to sit on it for her so she can take a vacation. She thinks of how much work it is to just sit there. She thinks of how much she wants to have fun and how she hates work. Horton the elephant walks by Mayzie. She pleads with Horton to sit on her egg for her so she can rest. Horton agrees and Mayzie tells him she'll return quickly.

Horton props additional tree branches to strengthen the tree so it will support his weight. He is able to climb on the tree and sit on the nest. He sits on the egg through a storm. Mayzie in the meantime is having so much fun in Palm Beach that she decides not to return.

Horton sits on the egg through the autumn and even winter to keep it warm. The mantra he repeats to himself is, "I meant what I said and I said what I meant...An elephant's faithful One hundred percent." With each new challenge Horton repeats these lines and recommits to guarding and protecting the egg.

In the spring Horton's friends tell him how ridiculous he looks sitting on an egg in a tree. The other animals enjoy teasing him but Horton continues to sit on the egg. Horton describes being lonely and wanting to play but still he remains with the egg. Later three hunters aim guns at Horton but instead of fleeing he obstinately protects the egg. Amazed at his tenacity and at the sight of an elephant hatching an egg, the hunters decide to take Horton, the tree, and egg with them. They travel with him through the jungle and over the ocean before they sell him to a circus.

The circus travels to Palm Beach where Horton meets Mayzie who attends the circus. Her encounter with Horton is interrupted when the egg begins hatching. Mayzie demands to have her egg back and tells Horton to leave her tree. She wants the egg back since the work is now done. Horton sadly descends from the tree. When the egg hatches a baby elephant with wings emerges. The circus

crowd cheers and then Horton and the new elephant bird are returned home where it says Horton is “happy, one hundred percent.”

I love this Seuss story that is an example of an elephant with great maturity and integrity. Mayzie is also an example of someone without integrity or responsibility who wants the egg but doesn't want to put in the work to hatch it. It is a fantastic story that supports the law of the farm or of reaping what you sow. Horton was dedicated even and especially when it was difficult. Mayzie shirked her responsibility and played. At the end Mayzie tries to get her egg back but the egg hatches according to who protected it. Horton fits Covey's description of a good leader who can be trusted and who keeps his commitments.

Leaders need to be constant like Horton despite the trials and tribulations that test resolve. Horton is an effective leader. He possesses the qualities that truly matter and I would feel comfortable following someone with his qualities.

Horton is featured in another Seuss story that can illustrate the importance of interdependence. Interdependence is synergistic. Covey describes interdependence as drawing on the strengths from others and combining it for the benefit of all. With interdependence humility is essential. Instead of thinking only our way is best we acknowledge and appreciate the varied experiences of others and draw on this variety to find effective solutions resulting in WIN/WIN results. In *First Things First* Covey states the following about interdependence, “We can create third alternative solutions that are far more creative, more appropriate, more workable, more rewarding than any solution we could have come up with on our own.”

*Horton Hears a Who* is a story that illustrates well the interdependent reality. Horton's acute hearing leads him to discover an extremely tiny community living on what looks like a speck of dust. Horton protects the community and rescues it from obliteration several times throughout the story.

The other animals in the jungle are the biggest threat to the Who community because they



insist Horton is making up the community. The other animals cannot hear as well as Horton and they repeatedly try to destroy what they think is a speck of dust. Horton asks the Whoville mayor to get every Who to make noise so the other animals will hear them and believe they actually exist. The mayor tries to ensure every Who is doing its part to make noise when he discovers the smallest Who Jo-Jo is not making any noise. The mayor takes Jo-Jo to the top of a tower and has him add his voice. He gives a small yop noise that is the extra needed for the other animals to hear and be convinced there is actually a town on the small thing that looks like a dust speck.

The kangaroo even offers to help Horton protect the small community. There are many examples of interdependence in this story. Horton's help is needed by Whoville. The small yop from Jo-Jo is also needed and saves Whoville from extinction. When the animals and Whos work together they find solutions that benefit the entire group.

Interdependence requires recognition that everyone has value. Seuss's *Sneetches* is an example of this. The sneetches are divided by sneetches who have stars on their bellies and those without stars. Instead of appreciating this difference the sneetches establish a class system with the star-bellied sneetches at the top. Each group discriminates against the other group of sneetches. A swindler offers the sneetches without stars on their bellies the chance to have these.

The sneetches without stars on their bellies eagerly get stars and the star-bellied sneetches are angry because they can't tell the difference. There is nothing to set them apart or make them feel superior to the other sneetches. The swindler makes additional money by offering to remove the stars. Each sneetch group adds or removes stars in a status-obsessed sneetch frenzy ending in confusion. McBean the swindler takes his money and leaves thinking the sneetches "Will never learn." Instead the sneetches do learn and decide all sneetches are equal. This is a wonderful attitude that must be present for interdependence to evolve.

Dr. Seuss left stories that illustrate timeless correct leadership principles. Covey principles and

Seuss Principles are consistent. Covey principles can be understood better by using Seuss stories to make these principles real. Intangible principles and virtues become concrete. There are enough Seuss stories to write many more comparisons. The stories are valuable tools that can simplify and demonstrate Covey leadership principles.

References

- Covey, S. R. (1990). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Covey, S. R. (1990). *Principle-Centered Leadership*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Covey, S. R. (1994). *First Things First*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Covey, S. R. (2000). *Living the 7 Habits: The Courage to Change*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Geisel, T. S. (1940). *Horton Hatches the Egg*. New York: Random House.
- Geisel, T. S. (1949). *Green Eggs and Ham*. New York: Random House.
- Geisel, T. S. (1961). *Sneetches: and other stories*. New York: Random House.
- Packer, B. K. (1975). *Teach Ye Diligently*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company.