



The 3rd Alternative: Solving Life's Most Difficult Problems

By Stephen R. Covey



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From the multimillion-copy bestselling author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—hailed as the #1 Most Influential Business Book of the Twentieth Century—*The 3rd Alternative* turns Dr. Stephen R. Covey’s formidable insight to a powerful new way to resolve professional and personal difficulties and create solutions to great challenges in organizations and society.

There are many methods of “conflict resolution,” but most involve compromise, a low-level accommodation that stops the fight without breaking through to amazing new results. *The 3rd Alternative* introduces a breakthrough approach to conflict resolution and creative problem solving, transcending traditional solutions to conflict by forging a path toward a third option, a 3rd Alternative that moves beyond your way or my way to a higher and better way—one that allows both parties to emerge from debate or even heated conflict in a far better place than either had envisioned. With the 3rd Alternative, nobody has to give up anything, and everyone wins.



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Editorial Review

Review

"In 'The 3rd Alternative', Dr. Covey inspires us to think differently about solving problems than we ever have before. We must set aside our differences, including our boundaries, languages, economics, politics and cultures and work hand in hand together to create solutions which are greater than the problems we now face."

--Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize winner 2006

"Once again, Stephen Covey has nailed it. In this latest book, he offers meaningful advice for navigating life's toughest challenges. It's not about 'my way, ' or 'your way, ' but seeking out 'our way.'"

--J.W. Marriott, Jr., Chairman & CEO of Marriott International, Inc.

"In this book, Covey reaches out way beyond his familiar domain, to the Universe, and has come up with a social vaccine capable of addressing if not resolving the existential agonies and angst that we all face, as individuals and to the organizations and societies that we live and work in. In this Olympiad vault, Covey has written his most ambitious and hopeful book, in my own view, a masterpiece to benefit all of us doing our best to live in peace and justice in this messy world."

--Warren Bennis, Distinguished Professor of Management, University of Southern California and author of the memoir, "Still Surprised"

"You can 'get' Stephen Covey's message in five pages--or less. But I dearly hope you will carefully read and apply "every" page. Stephen has given us a precious gift--but, like most profound ideas, it is the daily, conscious practice that can or will transform your life."--Tom Peters, author of "The Brand You 50 "and "Re-imagine: Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age"

"In 'The 3rd Alternative', Stephen Covey urges us to chart a course beyond the suboptimal solutions to all our crises - beyond left and right, and beyond the many false choices in front of us. "The 3rd Alternative" is a wise and welcome echo of Einstein's warning that the problems we're facing today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them."

--Arianna Huffington, president and editor-in-chief of the AOL Huffington Post Media Group

"Even in our conflicted times, now and again we catch a glimpse of the better thing. Dr. Covey shows us how to seek that better thing and transcend our deepest disputes."

--Archbishop Desmond Tutu

"A most compelling approach for addressing the most challenging issues of the day. It is an inarguable formula for success in the corporate world and beyond."

--Douglas R. Conant, retired CEO, Campbell Soup Company, and "New York Times" bestselling author

"Dr. Covey has done it again. "The 3rd Alternative" is not only powerful reading--it answers some of life's most challenging questions. A must-read for all future leaders."

--Jon M. Huntsman, Sr.

"In "The 3rd Alternative," Dr. Covey inspires us to think differently about solving problems than we ever have before. We must set aside our differences, including our boundaries, languages, economics, politics and cultures and work hand in hand together to create solutions which are greater than the problems we now face."

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About the Author

Recognized as one of *Time* magazine's twenty-five most influential Americans, Stephen R. Covey (1932–2012) was an internationally respected leadership authority, family expert, teacher, organizational consultant, and author. His books have sold more than twenty-five million copies in thirty-eight languages, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was named the #1 Most Influential Business Book of the Twentieth Century. After receiving an MBA from Harvard and a doctorate degree from Brigham Young University, he became the cofounder and vice chairman of FranklinCovey, a leading global training firm.

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3rd Alternative

1

The Transition Point

Life is full of problems. Problems that seem impossible to solve. Personal problems. Family problems. Problems at work, in our neighborhoods, and in the world at large.

Perhaps you're in a marriage that started off great, but now you can barely stand each other. You may have estranged relationships with your parents, siblings, or children. It could be that you feel overwhelmed and out of balance at work, always trying to do more with less. Or maybe, like so many others, you are tired of our litigious society, in which people are so quick to sue you don't dare make a move. We worry about crime and its drag on our society. We see politicians going at it and getting nowhere. We watch the news at night and lose hope that the perpetual conflicts between people and nations will ever be resolved.

So we lose hope, give up, or settle for a compromise that doesn't feel so good in the end.

That's why I've longed to write this book.

It's about a principle so fundamental that I believe it can transform your life and the whole world. It is the

highest and most important insight I have garnered from studying those people who lead truly effective lives.

Basically, it's the key to solving life's most difficult problems.

All people suffer adversities, mostly in silence. Most soldier on bravely in the face of their problems, working and hoping for a better future. For many, terror is just under the surface. Some of these terrors are physical, some psychological, but all are very real.

If you understand and live by the principle in this book, you may not only conquer your problems, but you may go on to build a future for yourself that's better than you ever imagined possible. I did not discover this principle—it's eternal. But for those who apply it to the challenges they face, it's no understatement to say that it may be the greatest discovery of their lives.

My book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* leads up to it. Of all the principles in that book, I called it "the most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying, and the most exciting." In *The 7 Habits*, I was able to deal with this principle in only a general way; but in this book, I invite you to explore it with me much more broadly and deeply. If you pay the price to truly understand it, you'll never think the same way again. You'll find yourself approaching your most difficult challenges in life in an entirely new, exponentially more effective way.

I'm profoundly excited to share with you stories about some rare people who have grasped this principle. They are not only problem solvers but also creators of the new future we all dream of. Among many, you'll read about

- A father who rescued his troubled daughter from years of despair and near suicide in one surprising evening.
- A young man in India who is solving the problem of electric power for millions of poor people—at virtually no cost.
- A police chief who cut the juvenile crime rate in a major Canadian city by half.
- A woman who is bringing New York's polluted harbor back to life—again at almost no cost.
- A husband and wife who once could hardly speak to each other and now laugh together about those difficult days.
- The judge who brought a quick, peaceful end to the biggest environmental lawsuit in American history—without setting foot in a courtroom.
- The principal of a high school for migrant workers' children who raised the graduation rate from a dismal 30 percent to 90 percent and tripled his students' basic skill levels—without spending any more money.
- A single mother and her teenager who went from bitter confrontation to renewed understanding and affection.
- A doctor who cures virtually all his patients of a deadly disease at a fraction of the price other doctors charge.

- The team that transformed Times Square from a cesspool of violence and filth to the top tourist attraction in North America.

Let me emphasize: none of these is a celebrity with lots of money and influence. All are, for the most part, ordinary people who are successfully applying this supreme principle to their toughest problems. And so can you.

I can hear you thinking, “Well, I’m not trying to do anything heroic like those people. I’ve got my own problems, and they’re big to me. I’m tired, and I just want to find a solution that works.”

Believe me, there’s nothing in this book that isn’t both global *and* personal. The principle applies equally well to a single mother trying her hardest to raise a restless teenager as to a head of state trying to stop a war.

You can apply this principle to

- A serious conflict at work with your boss or co-workers.
- A marriage with “irreconcilable differences.”
- A dispute with your child’s school.
- A situation that has put you in financial trouble.
- A critical decision you have to make on your job.
- A battle over some issue in your neighborhood or community.
- Family members who quarrel chronically—or won’t speak to each other at all.
- A weight problem.
- A job that doesn’t satisfy you.
- A child who won’t “launch.”
- A knotty problem you need to solve for a customer.
- An issue that might drag you into court.

I have taught the underlying principle of this book for more than forty years to literally hundreds of thousands of people. I’ve taught it to young schoolchildren, to rooms full of corporate CEOs, to graduating students, to heads of state in some thirty countries, and to everyone in between. I’ve approached all of them in virtually the same way. I have written this book to apply equally well to a playground, a battlefield, a boardroom, a legislative chamber, or a family kitchen.

I belong to a world leadership group seeking to build a better relationship between the West and the Islamic community. It includes a former U.S. secretary of state, prominent imams and rabbis, global business leaders, and experts on conflict resolution. At our first meeting, it became obvious that everyone had an agenda. It was all rather formal and cool, and you could just feel the tension. That was on a Sunday.

I asked permission from the group to teach them one principle before we went any further, and they graciously agreed. So I taught them the message of this book.

By Tuesday night the whole atmosphere had changed. The private agendas had been shelved. We had arrived at an exciting resolution that we had never anticipated. The people in the room were filled with respect and love for one another—you could see it, and you could feel it. The former secretary of state whispered to me, “I’ve never seen anything so powerful. What you’ve done here could totally revolutionize international diplomacy.” More on this later.

As I said, you don’t have to be a global diplomat to put this principle to work on your own challenges. Recently we surveyed people around the world to find out what their top challenges were personally, on the job, and in the world at large. It was not a representative sample; we just wanted to find out what different people had to say. The 7,834 people who responded were from every continent and from every level of every kind of organization.

- *In their personal lives.* The challenge they feel most personally is the pressure of overwork, coupled with job dissatisfaction. Many are having relationship problems. Typically, one middle manager from Europe writes, “I get stressed, feeling burned out, and don’t have time and energy to do things for me.” Another says, “My family is going wrong and it tips everything else out of balance.”

- *On the job.* Of course, people’s top job concerns are always scarce capital and profits. But many are also worried about losing ground in the global game: “We are very much stuck in our 100-year tradition. . . . We’re becoming more irrelevant every day. . . . Too little use is made of creativity and entrepreneurship.” From Africa, a top manager wrote, “I was working for an international company, but I resigned last year. I left because I could no longer find meaning in what I was doing.”

- *In the world.* From our respondents’ viewpoint, the top three challenges we face as a human family are war and terrorism, poverty, and the slow destruction of the environment. An Asian middle manager struck a pleading tone: “Our country belongs to one of the poorest in Asia. This is the battle cry among [us] where the majority of our population lives in poverty. There is a lack of employment, poor education, infrastructure facilities are hardly available, huge debt, poor governance, and corruption is rampant.”¹

This is a snapshot view of how our friends and neighbors are feeling. They might list different challenges tomorrow, but I suspect we’d see only variations on the same sorts of pain.

Under these mounting pressures, we fight each other more. The twentieth century was an age of impersonal war, but the twenty-first seems like an age of personal malice. The rage thermometer is way up. Families quarrel, co-workers contend, cyber bullies terrorize, courts are jammed, and fanatics murder the innocent. Contemptuous “commentators” swamp the media—the more outrageous their attacks, the more money they make.

This rising fever of contention can make us ill. “I’m deeply disturbed by the ways in which all of our cultures are demonizing the Other. . . . The worst eras in human history start like this, with negative otherizing. And then they morph into violent extremism,” says the wellness expert Elizabeth Lesser.² We know too well where this sort of thing leads.

So how *do* we resolve our most divisive conflicts and solve our most difficult problems?

- Do we go on the warpath, determined that we *won’t* take it anymore, but we *will* take it out on our

“enemies”?

- Do we play the victim, helplessly waiting for someone to save us?
- Do we take positive thinking to the extreme and slip into a pleasant state of denial?
- Do we sit back stoically, with no real hope that things will ever get better? Deep down, do we believe that all the prescriptions are just placebos anyway?
- Do we keep plugging away, like most people of goodwill, doing what we’ve always done in the slim hope that things will *somehow* get better?

No matter what approach we take to our problems, natural consequences will follow. War begets war, victims become dependent, reality crushes people in denial, cynics contribute nothing. And if we keep doing the same things we’ve always done, hoping that *this* time the results will be different, we are not facing reality. Albert Einstein reportedly said, “The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.”

To solve our most difficult problems, we must radically change our thinking—and that’s what this book is about.

As you read, you will find yourself poised on a transition point between your past, whatever it has been, and a future you have never imagined until now. You will discover within yourself a talent for change. You will think about your problems in an entirely revolutionary way. You will develop new mental reflexes that will propel you through barriers others find insurmountable.

You will be able to see from that transition point a new future for yourself—and the years ahead might be not at all what you expected. Instead of halting into an inevitable future of diminishing capacity riddled with problems, you can start now to fulfill your hunger for a life “in crescendo” that is always fresh and meaningful and filled with extraordinary contributions—right to the end.

By recentering your life on the principle of this book, you will find a surprising way forward into that future.



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