How effective leaders get results

7 ways to be more proactive

By **Jennifer Colosimo**
President, Enterprise Division,
FranklinCovey

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Leadership often means doing stuff no one else wants to. Broaching touchy topics. Making unpopular decisions. Accepting responsibility. Charting a clear path in a haze of uncertainty. Questioning the status quo.

These aren't exactly easy (or glamorous) undertakings — especially if you're relatively new to leadership and accustomed to letting others take charge. But the good news is you don't have to dramatically overhaul your behavior to take more initiative. You just need to make a few small, doable tweaks to your regular planning and communication habits. This guide will help you make changes, whether you are leading collocated teams, remote employees, or a mix of both.

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Are the 7 Habits® as relevant today as they were when they were first created? Absolutely, they are more relevant than ever before. The greater the change, the more difficult the challenges, the more relevant the 7 Habits become. Why? Because they are based on principles of effectiveness that endure."

— Stephen R. Covey

1. Most leaders are asked to do more than is humanly possible.

If you pretend you can handle anything and everything that comes your way, you could end up not only burning out, but also failing at your job.

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."
— Stephen R. Covey

To tell if you might be falling into this common trap, ask yourself:

How do you start your days? Do you sit down at your desk and simply react to whatever seems most urgent? Every role requires a certain amount of this — for example, maybe your team is responsible for resolving customer complaints as they crop up. But you can't afford to consistently get so bogged down in the crisis du jour that you lose sight of bigger, more important parts of your job, like ensuring your team is working toward key goals, or diving into a longer-term, high-profile project early so you have enough time to do quality work.

→ **To keep your priorities straight, set aside a few minutes at the end of each workday to make a list of your 3–5 most important tasks for the next day.**

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You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage to say no to other things."

—Stephen R. Covey

2. Clearly and explicitly communicate your expectations

Think your team knows exactly what you expect of them?
Unless you've clarified your performance standards with each of your direct reports—and done so effectively—don't be too sure.

> **"Accountability breeds response-ability."**
> — Stephen R. Covey

Admittedly, it can be nerve-racking to level with your team about standards they may fall short of or that earn you the label "tough." But excellence rarely happens out of the blue. If people are going to achieve it, they need to know what it looks like — and what it *doesn't* look like.

With this in mind, take some time to capture, in writing, how you define great performance for the different roles on your team. Shoot for accuracy and specificity. Instead of just "reliable," try:

"Meets or beats deadlines at least 80 percent of the time."

or:

"Completes work at such a high level, it requires an hour or less of a senior team member's time to review."

If your mind goes blank, or your definitions are too abstract to be meaningful, you have some work to do. How's your team supposed to have a firm grasp of your expectations if you don't?

Don't assume your expectations are apparent in your actions. Communicate them clearly and explicitly.

3. Follow these steps to become a feedback pro.

Ever find yourself on either the giving or receiving end of a surprising feedback revelation? A stellar direct report thinks you don't like their work, for instance, or your manager rarely reads your emails because they're so long?

A culture of feedback is built on trust.

If so, you've learned that feedback is too important to let circumstances alone dictate when or if it's shared. You and your team need regular feedback to know where you stand with each other and what areas need work.

A good feedback culture is built on trust, so if you don't already have a strong foundation of trust with your team members, boss, and peers, you'll need to build one.

Once you've established trust, here are three basic steps you can take to become a feedback specialist:

- **Shift your mindset to focus on the main purpose of feedback: to learn.**
  It's common to get hung up on the challenging aspects of feedback — the discomfort of telling someone they're underperforming, for example, or the sting of discovering you're not viewed as favorably as you imagined. But the short-term pain is almost always worth the opportunity to grow — or, at the very least, enhance your understanding of someone else's perspective.

- **Pay closer attention to less obvious forms of feedback such as body language, in meetings or on video conferences.**
  Feedback is all around you, all the time. If your manager shrugs and avoids eye contact, maybe you should ask a follow-up question to learn more about what's not being said. If your team chronically checks their phones during meetings, maybe you're focusing on the wrong issues or unnecessarily hijacking people's time. And if a peer manager reaches out to you for advice, maybe you're more respected and appreciated than you realize.

- **Consciously provide and collect feedback by explicitly scheduling it into your routine.**
  You can start by setting a quota for the number of times you give feedback to each person on your team. Once you have that down, you could create weekly, monthly, or quarterly reminders in your calendar to focus on feedback in other ways.

> "One of the greatest gifts you can give another human being is constructive feedback on a blind spot they never knew they had."
>
> —Stephen R. Covey

4. Schedule a regular phone or video chat with team members who work remotely.

If you have team members who don't work in the same office as you, it's easy to assume "no news is good news" and passively let days slip by without much, if any, contact.

Encourage remote team members to pair up for virtual chats.

Many have found themselves working remotely when it didn't use to be the norm. Remote workers are sometimes more productive because they aren't getting distracted by random conversations with co-workers. But the lack of regular communication can take an emotional toll and leave them feeling out of the loop.

You don't want to wake up one day and realize that your genius developer in New Zealand or your go-getter salesperson in New Delhi is too dispirited and disengaged to be much of a genius or a go-getter.

While it might seem overly formal, blocking out a recurring time, maybe daily or a few times a week, to check in with remote team members can help you stay better attuned to their unique challenges and needs — and if they work from home or out of a solo office, reduce their sense of isolation. It also provides an opportunity to keep them informed. You don't want to fall into the trap of passing along news to direct reports who are in close proximity, while neglecting those who aren't.

Choose video or phone chats over emailing or instant messaging. That way, it's easier to read your remote team members' expressions and moods. It may also help to clearly convey why you're checking in — not to be a micromanager, but because you want to make sure they're heard, supported, and informed.

For example:

> Mirembe, I was thinking it might be helpful for us to schedule a video chat — maybe at 4 o'clock your time, every Tuesday and Thursday. I want to make sure I'm regularly getting your input and benefiting from your expertise. Plus, it will help me stay in touch with how you're doing so I can provide support if you need it. Would you be up for trying this?

"

Whenever someone waits for someone else to provide a solution, I tell them 'Use your R and I' (resourcefulness and initiative)."

—Stephen R. Covey

5. When you're torn over whether to initiate a difficult conversation, do it.

A historically strong performer on your team suddenly starts slacking off, and you're hoping it's just a temporary blip. Your team is in danger of missing th e ship date for a product upgrade, but you'd rather not bring it up with your manager because they have been under a lot of stress lately.

> **Effective leaders see differences as a catalyst to build dynamic teams that bring about change.**

A peer with a lot of clout keeps co-opting your team's time without asking you, but you don't want to get on their bad side.

In situations like these, you're faced with a choice: say something, or let it slide. And while your decision will depend on your specific circumstances — the people involved, your organization's culture, your management style, and countless other factors — many managers, more often than not, opt to let it slide. Why? Because saying nothing seems safer. Easier. Faster.

The key word is *seems*. That high performer who's slacking off could be looking for another job — and by failing to address the issue triggering the job search, you could increase your risk of losing the person.

By not alerting your manager to the possibility of missing the product ship date, you could make it harder for them to come up with a customer-communication plan, ultimately adding even more to her stress. And letting a peer manager continue to co-opt your team's time could undermine the team's ability to meet goals over time, eventually hurting your reputation more than irritating the powerful peer.

→ **So when in doubt, sit down, or schedule a call with the other person or people involved and talk about what's really going on. You don't have to say it perfectly. Simply saying it — and then listening — is enough.**
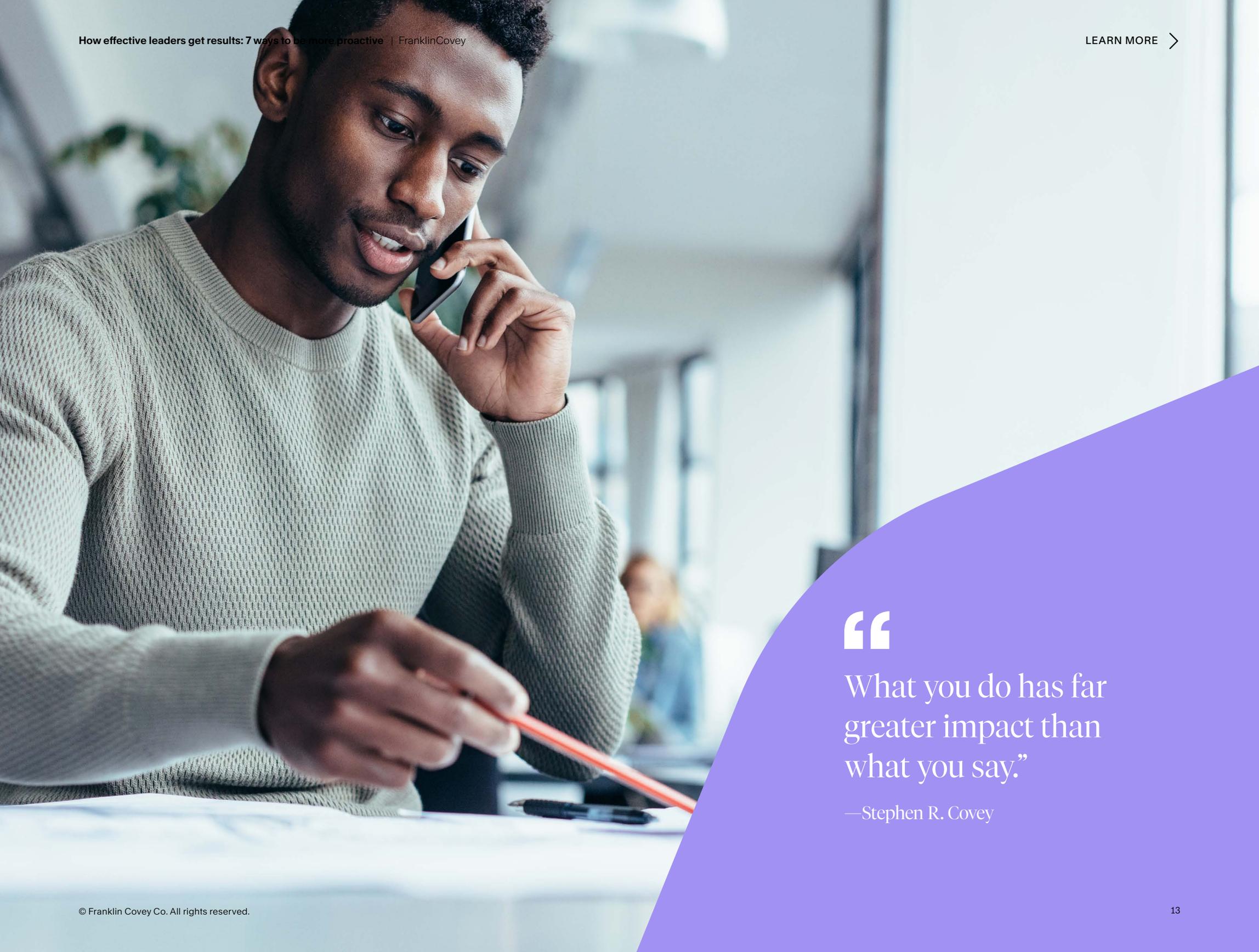
> "
>
> What you do has far greater impact than what you say."
>
> —Stephen R. Covey

6. Create customized retention plans to develop and engage top talent.

You're bound to lose good people from time to time through no fault of your own. But it's a lot easier to accept if you've done everything in your power to keep it from happening.

Don't just think about the strongest, flashiest performers but also team members who are quietly consistent.

That means consciously taking steps to guard against unwanted turnover instead of just crossing your fingers and hoping the superstars of your team — and the quietly consistent stalwarts, who are easier to forget about but sometimes just as painful to lose — remain happy.

So, what does an effective retention plan look like? Well, it depends on whom you're trying to retain and what makes them tick. Here's what Gallup found through conducting employee-engagement surveys for decades: "Contrary to what many managers might think, most of their employees who voluntarily leave the company aren't doing so for better pay or benefits."

Compensation is certainly a factor, but things like holding regular 1-on-1s, getting to know your team members as people, consistently giving both reinforcing and redirecting feedback, and exploring career-development ideas together can have a bigger impact.

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Leadership happens one conversation at a time. So be mindful with each one."

—Todd Davis,
Bestselling Author, *Get Better*

7. Set a quarterly learning goal for yourself and share it with your manager.

"If you're not learning, you're dooming yourself to keep working the same way you do today — which almost certainly means you'll fall behind when the world changes around you."

"**We become what we repeatedly do.**"
— Stephen R. Covey

Unless you want to risk becoming obsolete, redundant, or mired in the status quo — a doubly dangerous mindset for a manager, given how it can stifle the rest of your team — don't get too comfortable with your level of competence and expertise.

While it's hard to find time for outside reading about the market you serve, coaching sessions on your leadership skills, or an online course on a key development in your field, it's a lot harder — and more painful — to get caught unprepared.

Your organization's success depends on strong individual performance.

No matter how competent your people are, they won't generate sustained and lasting results unless they're able to effectively lead themselves; influence, engage, and collaborate with others; and continually improve and renew their capabilities.

Renowned as the world's premier personal leadership-development solution, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People®* aligns enduring principles of effectiveness with today's technology and practices. By making these principles part of your organization's shared culture, you can propel all of your employees toward their very best performance.

To get started, email us at info@franklincovey-benelux.com, or visit franklincovey-benelux.com.

Or call us at:
Belgium: +32 (0)2 719 02 15
The Netherlands: +31 (0)33 453 06 27
Luxembourg: +352 266 244

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