

Seven Habits of Highly Effective IEP Teams

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(With acknowledgment and thanks to Stephen Covey)

1. Be Proactive

Taking initiative does not mean being pushy, obnoxious, or aggressive. It does mean recognizing our responsibility, to make things happen.

Fundamental in our efforts to become proactive members of IEP teams is adopting an attitude that is collaborative, facilitative, and responsible. To be proactive requires a shift in our thinking from a deficit-based model of education to a capacity model. Often, goals for IEPs are developed as a result of a label, or something that appears to be wrong – i.e., reacting to a behavior that others do not think is acceptable. Proactive goals and objectives are based on the premise that the entire team is responsible for making things happen. John will use a transition object such as a computer disk when it is time to go to computer class. The team realizes if John knows in advance it will soon be computer time, and can carry something with him to remind him where he is going, he will be less likely to exhibit challenging behaviors when asked to go to computer class.

2. Begin with the End in Mind

This habit is based on imagination-the ability to envision, to see the potential, to create with our minds what we cannot at present see with our eyes....

Before developing an IEP, learn about the student. Be able to envision the future, the possibilities. What are his or her dreams? Nightmares? What are the learner's strengths and needs? Where does he or she want to live after school? What kind of job would he or she be fulfilling? It has been too easy in the past to look at the small picture instead of determining what the end of the journey will look like. Once that picture is clear, it makes sense to decide what he or she must be taught in order to get there.

3. Put First Things First

Create a clear, mutual understanding of what needs to be accomplished, focusing on what, not how; results not methods. Spend time. Be patient. Visualize the desired result.

Prioritize! It is impossible for anyone, in one year's time, to work on everything they would like to learn. Having nine, ten or more goals and dozens of objectives on an IEP is akin to being set up for failure. What is urgent or most important in the coming year that needs to be addressed on the IEP?

4. Think Win-Win

Win-Win is a frame of mind that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win-Win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial and satisfying.

Consensus building is a key element of effective, collaborative IEP meetings. Reaching consensus indicates that power and control has been shared. Demanding parents or dictating educators do not contribute to win-win solutions. IEP goals and objectives which are too general and not designed for progress lead to a lose-lose situation. How many times have you worked with a student who has the same goals and objectives year after year? Both the student and the teacher are frustrated. Something is wrong with the goal when there is no progress. Be specific in stating the desired results of the objectives, the guidelines for achievement, how accountability will be determined, and when to decide if the goal and/or objective is not appropriate.

5. Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood.

Seek First to Understand' involves a very deep shift in paradigm. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other people's lives.

In a truly collaborative IEP process educators will listen to and understand parents: parents will listen to and understand educators. All team members will realize the importance of listening to and understanding the student. The desired outcome is not for everyone to always agree but to understand each team member's view point. The power of this type of listening is that it gives the team accurate data with which to work. In order for this to happen, language at meetings must be jargon free. The final product (the IEP document) must be written in language that everyone working with the student can understand.

6. Synergize

Synergy works; it's a correct principle. It is the crowning achievement of all the previous habits. It is effectiveness in an interdependent reality - it is teamwork, team building, the development of unity, and creativity with other human beings.

Effective IEPs are those that have been developed collaboratively by a transdisciplinary team. There is creative cooperation occurring at each step of the development process. All participants strive to work together, realizing it takes both parents and educators to educate students. It is unlikely that this will occur at one IEP event. The quality of the preplanning for an IEP is of equal value to the official meeting. The time devoted to the preplanning process will differ depending on each individual student.

7. Sharpening the Saw

This is the habit of renewal. It circles and embodies all the other habits. It is the habit of continuous improvement that lifts you to new levels of understanding and living each of the habits.

Celebration of success is one of the keys to effective IEP teams. These celebrations recognize the achievements we have made. They also energize us to keep on this collaborative journey with a student toward a life of his or her choosing.

- Take time to snack!
- Share stories - funny and serious
- Offer words of appreciation
- Acknowledge gifts and talents of all team members
- Renew commitment to the journey

Note: Quotes in bold and the seven basic concepts are directly from “**7 Habits of Highly Effective People**” by Steven J. Covey. This article was published in the Fall 2003 issue of *Outlook*, the LDA of Michigan newsletter.