

Book Review: *Personal Development for Smart People* by Steve Pavlina
Matthew Deeg, Hanover College

I have no doubt that the people reading *Essentials* are smart people who want to become smarter and better professionals. Because of that, this book is for you; it is for anyone who wants to better their life, not through developing specific skills, but through becoming a better human being. Steve Pavlina (2008) notes in the introduction his goal in writing is to answer two tough questions: “What does it mean for us to grow as conscious human beings, and how do we intelligently guide that process?” (p. xiv). This is not your average self-help book; it does not focus on giving you a specific skill in time management, relationship building, or budgeting. Rather, Pavlina is focused on helping readers develop core principles, which will lead to success in all those other more skill-focused areas.

About the Author

Steve Pavlina is not a guru; he is not an educator. He is a former computer programmer with a background in artificial intelligence. His passion for personal growth and development began with a conviction for theft while in college; it was during his trial and subsequent community service he realized his need to turn his life around and focus on core principles to live a more fulfilling and socially-contributory life. To boost his academic efforts upon his return to college, he focused on personal growth so he could be a better student and person. After graduation, even while running his own computer game development company, he continued to seek out self-help books and soon came to realize his passion was not building more computer games; it was in his hobby of personal development. This led to the launch of his personal development website and ultimately to this book. Why share all this? Because, in some regards, Pavlina is just like us – he took a passion and interest he had and used it to help others. His curiousness about leading a better life has helped countless others to do the same. We all want to do the same, right?

About the Book

Personal Development for Smart People is a very straight-forward read. The book is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on seven fundamental principles in personal development which then leads to the second section on potential application in a variety of areas. The first section is by far the meat of the book; in his quest for a common pattern behind all successful growth efforts, Pavlina identified seven principles: truth, love, power, oneness, authority, courage, and intelligence (see figure 1). The first seven chapters are, of course, focused on delving deeper into each of the seven principles. He begins each chapter by noting key components of the principle, easy to comprehend building blocks that lead to greater understanding of the principle. Following this discussion of key components, Pavlina identifies specific blocks in our lives or the world around us that keep us from fully aligning with the principle at hand. Lastly, he articulates ways to increase the presence of each principle in our lives. As you move through the principles, you will note that each builds off of and feeds into the others.

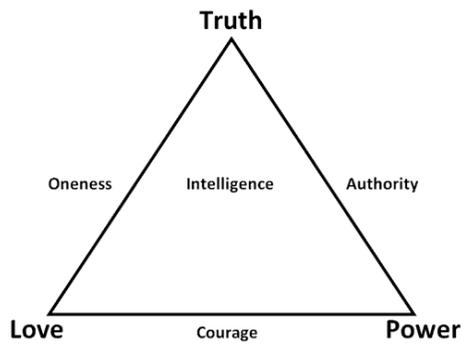


Figure 1: The Seven Principles

As examples, Pavlina (2008) notes that love helps us discover truth and that oneness helps align power with truth and love to be a force for good. This connectedness is essential in helping us seek each of the principles in our own lives; because they are all related, we cannot ignore one if we want to be fully successful in our growth. As Pavlina (2008) wraps up the principles, he notes that “these principles may seem a bit abstract, and you may still have some doubts as to whether they can actually work in the real world. In Part II of this book, you learn how to apply these fundamental principles” (p. 133).

As promised, in the second half of the book, Pavlina moves to application. He again focuses on specific areas, this time on six aspects of life: habits, career, money, health, relationships, and spirituality. With each aspect, he follows a similar pattern as his discussion of the principles. He introduces the aspect and defines it, and then he shows how each principle interacts with that topic. For some of the relationships, the discussion is short; others go much further in depth and offer ways to apply the principle at hand to the life area. I did not find this section as useful because I would rather take concepts and create my own applications, but his discussion and ideas do provide some sound suggestions for application. At the very least, it is a worthwhile jumping-off point to apply the concepts in each of these areas in your own life.

Potential Applications

This book could have several uses for our life and work. First, the obvious: we can read it and become better people and professionals by internalizing and applying the concepts Pavlina shares. It is certainly not a one-time read; each time I review the principles, I see different applications in my life and am encouraged to focus more on them. Moving past the personal application, we can use the concepts presented as discussion points with students and colleagues. I could see the concepts being introduced during a retreat and then reviewed on an individual basis with staff or student leaders; they each provide ways to check in with students on their wellbeing and growth as people. Lastly, because of the way in which it is written, the book is perfect for a book club or discussion group. Each of the building blocks and societal blocks offered can be examined, with countless answers from those involved on how they appear in our lives and how we can apply them further. And, with Pavlina continually providing free content on his website, discussion can lead to further investigation of application and discovery of new resources.

Closing Thoughts

We are in the business of helping young men and women become better. We can't forget our own development and our own personal principles. *Personal Development for Smart People* will help focus or refocus your efforts. It will help you understand guiding principles in your life and give you practical ways to integrate those principles into key areas of your work and play. It is an engaging read that will have a different impact on each person who reads it.

References

Pavlina, S. (2008). *Personal development for smart people: The conscious pursuit of personal growth*. New York City, NY: Hay House Inc.