

Leadership strategies: build your sphere of influence

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A great leader once said, “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do what you want done because he wants to do it.” Since these words were spoken, many theories on leadership and leadership styles have emerged. However, one essential ingredient to any successful leadership philosophy is undeniable: the role of influence. As such, the skills to build a sphere of influence and exercise that influence effectively are fundamental to success. Developing these skills will increase a leader’s ability to obtain buy-in on strategic initiatives and execute those initiatives smoothly. This is especially true in a complex and challenging economic climate where competition is on the rise, companies are expanding their reach across international borders and leaders are finding themselves in positions of responsibility without direct authority.

Influence defined

Influence is defined by the *Random House Dictionary* as the capacity or power of a person to produce an effect on others by intangible or indirect means. It is the ability to move or impel a person to some action. Consciously or not, business leaders rely on influence every day to shape their environment, lead people and achieve corporate goals. The power of influence is particularly important in an environment that requires executives to manage a growing number of projects and business conditions through collaboration and persuasion rather than direct authority. In particular, the use of influence skills is crucial when:

- getting colleagues on board for a change initiative;
- soliciting across boundaries for project resources;
- guiding a team to see the big picture;
- developing a shared understanding of the pathway to the future;
- making team players out of people who resist change;
- encouraging team players to work beyond functional boundaries;
- winning support from those with competing agendas;
- creating positive results with cross function teams;
- empowering others and selling ideas to both colleagues and the boss.

Improving influence skills, however, requires awareness, practice, and an understanding of how to use this power appropriately.

The science behind influence

More than five decades of research has proven that people can be influenced to change behavior by appealing to a specific set of deep human drives and needs. Robert Cialdini, PhD, a leading expert on the psychology and social science behind influence, is an

advocate for applying the power of influence with integrity in the business world. In his research, Cialdini has identified six principles of influence: reciprocity, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity, which are described in his book titled, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*.

- **Reciprocity.** Research shows that every human society feels the obligation to reciprocate. If you do something for somebody, they will feel obliged to do something for you. For example, when you hold open a door you receive a thank you and a smile. If you send a birthday card to a friend, you're almost certain to get one in return. Pay for a co-worker's coffee, and she'll pick up the next one. Aware of this principle, businesses utilize reciprocity to increase business. For example, charitable organizations send free address labels to solicit donations, and real estate firms offer free house appraisals to list your house in the future.
- **Commitment and consistency.** People respond positively to those who are consistent in their messages. By nature, humans have an insatiable desire for consistency. That's why people are wary of leaders who "flip flop" and embrace leaders, politicians and belief systems that "stick to their guns," even to the occasional point of foolishness. This need for consistency is observed through certain political tactics such as push polling. In these situations, paid surveyors call voters and ask whether they would vote for a man who refused to say the pledge of allegiance. This verbal response and commitment are then translated into votes when a well designed campaign alludes to the opposition candidate's refusal to pledge allegiance just before Election Day.
- **Social validation.** People often make decisions by observing the decisions of others. In a famous illustration of this point, psychologist Solomon Asch put a group of eight subjects in a room and showed them a picture of vertical lines of various and widely differing lengths. He asked the group to identify which line on the right side of the picture matched the length of a line on the left side of the same picture. While the correct answer was plainly obvious, Asch had previously instructed every member of the group, except one (the subject), to give the same, wrong answer. After many renditions, Asch observed that his "subjects" were clearly confused and one-third of them went with the majority view even though it was obviously an incorrect answer.
- **Liking.** People respond more readily to people they like and people they feel more comfortable with because they share similar associations. It has been said a thousand times: people do business with people they know, like and trust. Now there is science to support this claim. Research confirms that attributes like physical attractiveness, familiarity, similarity, and compliments all factor into to the principle of "liking" and a willingness to engage.
- **Authority.** People respond more positively when they respect the authority of a person providing information. Authority can come from a variety of sources from dress and appearance to titles or context, or a combination of both. To illustrate, consider the findings of a research team comprised of doctors and nurses from the Midwest who exposed potentially deadly consequences of mechanical obedience to physician orders. Shockingly, these researchers discovered that 95 percent of regular staff nurses complied unhesitatingly with a patently improper order when given by a physician. The study revealed that nurses would deny their own professional intelligence gained through considerable medical training and years of experience in favor of obedience to a legitimate authority figure.
- **Scarcity.** Competition for scarce resources has powerful motivating properties, and evidence shows that people find scarce products more attractive. Accordingly, companies routinely leverage this tendency by offering products or services for a limited time only. That is why some stores are perpetually "going out of business"; rock concerts are promoted as "last ever" tours, and certain products are marketed as limited edition. All are examples of scarcity principles at work.

As both leaders and followers, Cialdini reminds us that we are all subject to the power of influence. When the highest standards are expected and consistently demonstrated,

influence can help pursue our highest aspirations and create great achievements. On the other hand, when standards are murky, when skirting close to the edge is tolerated or even encouraged, we can find ourselves questioning even our own deeply held values. Thus is the power of influence. Used ethically, these principles are powerful instruments in any leader's toolbox. Used unethically or thoughtlessly and they can cripple an organization. (*Leader to Leader*, Spring 2003, Number 28 Creating an Ethical Environment by Robert Cialdini)

Influence and the decision making process

Unfortunately, many leaders underestimate the value of developing a sphere of influence and rely on a directive management style to accomplish objectives. In some cases, leaders are convinced that they already have the right answers and do not need the input or support of colleagues. In other cases, leaders succumb to the pressure of time constraints and assume a more directive style is necessary to meet looming deadlines. With decades of experience and tested leadership know how under their belts, they choose to implement quickly rather than devoting time and energy to building their sphere of influence and gaining consensus. While this approach may deliver short-term benefits, it also introduces negative long-term consequences for the leader, the team and the entire organization.

"Absent a burning platform, pushing a decision through because you are certain you have all of the information and data is not enough, especially with those who are not direct reports," explains Jim Gibson, Executive Vice President and CFO for RTI, International, an independent, non-profit research institute. By pushing a decision through, leaders fail to establish buy-in which contributes to push back, questions regarding the wisdom behind decisions and a staff who will drag their feet during implementation. For example, when RTI was changing the methodology for an accounting procedure, senior leadership thought the need for change was obvious and moved forward without consensus building. As a result, a great deal of pushback surfaced, jeopardizing employee acceptance, which required immediate attention before implementation could move forward.

Unless the issue really puts an organization at risk, it is more important to use influence skills to build consensus by demonstrating leadership flexibility and adaptability. This is accomplished by listening to and reasoning with stakeholders who approach the issue from different angles and different perspectives. This approach also sets the stage for future give and take and deposits negotiating currency into the virtual leadership bank. Gibson explains:

At RTI we use three forums to evaluate issues: The Executive Leadership Team; the Senior Leadership Team which includes direct reports; and a Shared Services Council. These groups encourage shared decision making instead of managers invoking positional authority, or delegated authority from the boss, in order to push through decisions before obtaining adequate input from the right people.

Making good decisions is not just about facts and figures. It also requires connecting with people emotionally and being skilled at communicating so that decisions are always made in the best interest of the organization as a whole, not just one division or one player.

The advantage of influence

Directive leaders may have the most to gain from recognizing the long-term advantages of developing a sphere of influence. These leaders are typically identified as agenda-driven, task-orientated, all about action and getting things done. Their preferred, yet rigid, style may serve them well in task-oriented, middle-management roles where telling people what to do is one way to deliver on objectives from the boss. However, this approach – even when followed politely by a "please" – is often counter productive for senior leadership roles where the focus is on strategy, working collaboratively and accomplishing tasks through the actions of others. For that reason, many CEOs witness the derailment of direct reports who fail to make the transition to senior management. These otherwise brilliant, well educated,

experts in their functional areas often lack the social skills and emotional intelligence necessary to lead effectively. In other words, they lack the ability to develop style flexibility, including the ability to empower others through effective influence skills.

Mistakenly, many business leaders look at the value and purpose of influence skills in the very limited domain of generating business through marketing and sales. This is a false understanding of influence. Rather, influence skills are relevant to every business transaction that involves relationships and the need to lead effectively. In a cross industry partnership, for example, it is essential to bring about an understanding of how relationships can deliver on mutual objectives. To illustrate, consider the experience of bringing together a group of industrial research leaders from the chemical industry to collaborate on a major project. Victoria F. Haynes, CEO of RTI, International explains:

Some years ago we brought a group of industry leaders together to develop Vision 2020. Many had not worked together in the past. Accordingly, each leader brought to the table their unique experiences, ideas, professional opinions and agenda. The first action was to take a step back to build consensus around objectives and identify how this project could ultimately benefit each individual and the industry as a whole. Through the appropriate use of influence skills, an inclusive approach, and lots of negotiating, consensus was built and the end product was a chemical industry research road map that is still in use today.

When this type of approach is used, it becomes possible for project members to experience the benefits of collaboration which ultimately leads to buy-in. Without buy-in, project leaders are forced to rely on a directive approach and, as a result, often experience stonewalling and sabotage, even when the facilitator is the boss! On the other hand, when an inclusive approach is taken, participants develop a sense of shared ownership over the strategy, implementation tactics and any problems or issues that may result. Because their opinions and ideas were incorporated into the plan, team members are more willing and committed to making the plan work.

Other advantages of a more flexible leadership style that uses influence skills include:

- A shared sense of responsibility and accountability for success.
- More effective communication: cross-organization, cross-industry and cross-border.
- Fewer problems with implementation as potential issues are recognized sooner.
- More innovation and creativity as the fear of rejection is minimized.
- More collaborative workforce with fewer hard functional “silos”.
- Less attrition as people feel empowered, valued and motivated to grow as leaders.
- Less resistance to change which helps meet project deadlines.
- Increased and wider access to critical information.

“In the case of Vision 2020 it was essential to convince the participants of the value in putting aside other priorities and committing to this project. By focusing on the potential gains such as business growth, business diversity and improved research results, it was possible to build enthusiasm and achieve commitment,” explains Dr Haynes.

Trust: the platform for influence

The ability to develop a constructive sphere of influence and use that influence as a tool requires trust. And trust starts with building and nurturing relationships. This is particularly true for newly appointed executives in any organization. For these executives, the first step must be to establish themselves as trustworthy individuals by building rapport with staff before attempting to develop a shared vision of the future. In *Trust Is a Competency*, Stephen Covey states that: “trust is quite possibly the single most powerful and influential lever for senior administrators and organizations today.” Rather than a soft, intangible and illusive social virtue, trust is a critical, highly relevant and tangible asset, argues Covey. He cites redundancy, bureaucracy, politics, disengagement, turnover, churn and fraud among the problems rampant in low-trust organizations.

Trust, on the other hand, increases value, accelerates growth, enhances innovation, improves collaboration, strengthens partnering, speeds up execution and heightens loyalty. “In fact, there is no senior leadership without trust”, says Covey. He defines senior leadership as getting results in a way that inspires trust and advises leaders to model trust through character, competence and demonstrated trust-building behavior.

Of course, building trust takes time, but even the simplest actions of creating rapport are a good place to start:

- Connect with people emotionally. Demonstrate that you care about their ideas and about them as individuals. Have coffee or a meal with them, ask questions and actively listen to their opinions and concerns.
- Invite and seriously consider everyone’s input before making a decision. Never make the assumption that you know more than your team. “Leaders are far more likely to make a mistake when they act on too little information. Instead, wait to act while learning more,” say James O’Toole and Warren Bennis in *A Culture of Candor*.
- Tell the truth, and be consistent in your explanations. Inconsistency breeds distrust.
- Encourage others to “speak truth to power” and tell you the truth, no matter how unpalatable.
- Set a good example by admitting your mistakes and developing a culture that expects others to be accountable for and learn from their mistakes.
- Share information freely unless it is absolutely confidential.
- Follow through on promises and commitments.
- Build organizational structures that encourage candor such as open-door policies, town hall meetings and other forums to tap into a broader network of relationships and information.
- Encourage creativity by rewarding people who challenge assumptions.
- Start out in relationships by building trust unless that trust is violated. “Leaders first must trust others before others will trust them,” states O’Toole and Bennis.

Use stories to invoke influence

Great leaders recognize that story telling, one of the oldest, most powerful modes of communication, can capture the hearts and minds of staff and help them discover creative solutions. Through stories, leaders align the organizational mission and values with people’s intrinsic needs to belong and contribute. Researchers have found that storytelling is far more convincing to an audience than rational arguments, statistics, or facts.

In her book, *Corporate Legends and Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*, Peg Newhouse outlines the results of a study with MBA students, which demonstrates the power of a story. Statistically oriented MBA students were divided into three groups. One was given only statistics related to the potential success of a winery. The second group was given statistics and a story. The third group received only the story. The story ended with: “And my father would be so proud to sip this wine.” A majority of students in the third group believed that the winery would be successful, while skeptics dominated in the other two groups. The story, not the statistics, sold the winery.

The fact is, a story makes a strategic priority or goal more real to an audience than other forms of persuasion because it reframes the argument in an easy-to-grasp format to which anyone can relate. When it becomes necessary to influence other people, a story frame is always more effective than the singular use of a rational, linear argument, provided the story answers the audience’s question. Finding great stories requires listening and observing day-to-day activities in the organization to discover and showcase achievements. Look for actions and activities that identify both risk takers and informal leaders throughout the organization. Make it a priority to identify what seemingly average employees are doing to really make a difference in the organization, sometimes in extraordinary ways. Discover the

organization's heroes and those employees who go the extra mile. Then, select the stories which reflect organizational values such as trust and collaborative decision making. Finally, tell their stories at town hall meetings, through internal publications, annual reports and on the institutional website.

The fuel for success

Influence is a core skill at every level of every business transaction. As such, all levels of individuals involved from strategy to execution can benefit from gaining influence beyond the authority provided by a formal hierarchical structure. Whether you are the CEO, CFO, division head, account manager or information technology professional, your future success depends on your ability to influence others today. Start by identifying those in your sphere of influence. Does it include direct reports and staff? Does it include peers across the organization, superiors, key constituent group, shareholders, a board, or other professionals with whom you collaborate in order to meet corporate objectives? Whoever it is in your current sphere of influence, recognize the opportunities to expand your sphere of influence, hone your influence skills and put them into action. And remember, influence is the fuel for success. Do not make the mistake of waiting until your fuel gauge is on empty before you realize that your success depends on a sphere of influence you have not developed.

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