

Building Your Influence

By BNET Editorial

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“Lean and mean” is a popular catchphrase used when describing today’s organizational structures. In an effort to become more efficient and drive down costs, many organizations have adopted a matrix or networked structure that relies on teams to implement managerial decisions and the resultant projects. Consequently, cooperation within and between teams from different parts of the business has taken on significant importance, and the traditional top-down hierarchical chain of command is becoming less meaningful. Rather than candidly telling someone what to do, you will need to understand where their values, beliefs, and motivations lie so that you can influence or persuade them to meet your agenda. As a result, working relationships are based less on power and authority than on the ability to negotiate and find a win-win solution. This emphasizes the human connection and is a much more sophisticated form of communication. Many people don’t feel comfortable engaging in this type of interaction, especially in a business setting. However, most of us already use influence and persuasion far more than we realize, so by increasing your awareness of your instinctive talents, you will be able to develop your skills and put them to more effective use.

What You Need to Know

How can I influence people over whom I have no authority?

You don’t need authority in order to influence people effectively. In fact, influencing from a position of authority could be construed as bullying. Learning to use persuasion to win support will help you to assure that both parties get what they need. If you enter the discussion with the intention of arriving at a win-win solution, you’ll find that you have a lot more authority than you thought!

How might the rules differ for influencing upward?

Imagine the benefits that would best appeal to the person you are dealing with, regardless of their level in the organizational hierarchy. Then make a goal of delivering those benefits, and you’ll probably find that your approach is effective.

Do different people or circumstances call for different tactics?

Yes, and you will need to put yourself in the other person’s shoes so that you can anticipate their needs, while at the same time planning a satisfactory outcome for yourself. Spend some time building understanding before you begin. You may need to put your own motivations aside for a while as

you build an understanding of what motivates the other person. This will give you a better chance of achieving your goals.

How will I know when to back off and settle for a less-than-perfect outcome?

By carefully watching the other person's body language, you should be able to discern when they are unwilling to negotiate further. It is hard to disguise these messages, so be aware of what is going on with them and take cues from their stance and facial expressions, as well as from what they say. Don't push too hard or you will just be pushed back in return. If you start getting negative messages, leave things alone for a while and agree to return to the discussion later. Your negotiating partner may be more willing to continue after having thought over your proposal, provided it is reasonable.

What to Do

Get the Right Attitude

When you attempt to influence or persuade someone to do something, it's important to realize that the outcome depends very much on how you view these tactics. If you see them as manipulative and only used to win an unfair advantage, you will probably not be very good at them. On the other hand, if you believe that if you don't get everything you want you've lost, you will also undermine your efforts at reaching an agreement. Either way you will probably end up being clumsy and heavy handed or you will give up too soon and allow your opponent to walk all over you. However, there are ways to reach cooperation, openness, and a good resolution. To accomplish this, you must start by seeing influencing occasions as an opportunity to engage with someone who shares your desire for a mutually satisfactory outcome.

Prepare Thoroughly

- Familiarize yourself with the situation and be clear about what you want to accomplish.
- Do your research carefully and make sure you have all the necessary facts. You don't want to miss something that might make you look unprepared during your conversation.
- Before you embark on your influencing strategy, canvass the views of stakeholders to get a sense of where their motivations and values lie. Then forewarn any interested parties of your position and proposition and gauge whether they are willing to support you. If you sense that they are basically in your corner but may have concerns about your approach, you can always choose to modify your position.

- Put some thought into where you want the meeting to take place, making sure to choose a physical environment that is conducive to good communication. It is best not to conduct your conversation in public. If your negotiating partner is at all concerned about losing face, you don't want to inhibit their ability to be open and flexible.
- Be clear about the reasons for having the conversation and outline what you believe to be the common ground. Check with the other party to make sure that both of you understand the situation. If not, you risk undermining your whole influencing strategy.
- Make clear what objectives you would like to reach by the end of the conversation. When thinking about your preferred outcome, develop a contingency position or what you would be willing to settle for, and be prepared to adjust your expectations if necessary.
- Emphasize your desire to reach a win-win outcome and check to make sure that you haven't overlooked anything.

Be Assertive

Assertive communication gives equal credibility to both you and your negotiating partner and encourages mutual respect and regard. If you want a win-win solution, start by using assertive language, including a lot of "I" statements. Indicate by your speech and body language that you are prepared to take responsibility for your own views and feelings.

It's also important to show empathy for the other person by demonstrating that you can see things from their point of view. To help you with this, imagine being in the shoes of someone who is being addressed by you. Try to experience the conversation from their perspective and feel what it's like to be confronted with the methods and techniques you use. Do you demonstrate thoughtfulness and respect? If you feel uncomfortable when you think about yourself facing yourself, then it will probably be uncomfortable for them too!

Listen attentively to what the other person is saying and observe their tone of voice and body language. It's important to pick up any clues about what's going on with them and how they feel about the way the conversation is progressing. If you sense that they are becoming resistant to your proposition or methods, take a step back and create some space for reflection. It is tempting to seek instant gratification, but you don't want to be perceived as a bully. Sometimes a better resolution can come about if influencing is given time to mature.

Choose Your Weapons Carefully

Below are several influencing techniques that you may want to consider using. Some work better in one type of situation and some in another. And there are a few that are best to avoid!

- *Use reason and logic.* This approach works with people who are intellectually driven, as it relies on presenting rational and reasoned argument to win favor. It may not work with people who

are driven more by their emotions or in situations where values and beliefs are of prominent importance.

- *Inspire agreement.* By creating a rich and detailed picture or reflecting a desirable end point, this type of influencing style may inspire agreement and get your opponent to buy in to your proposition. It appeals particularly to people who are strategically oriented and visually acute.
- *Empathize and cooperate.* You are much more likely to build rapport and encourage cooperation if you understand and can tap into the other person's values and motivations. This approach works well when there is empathy between you and your partner. But be careful, as things can go very wrong if you misread the other's motivations!
- *Bargain for favors.* "If you do this for me, I'll do that for you!" Bargaining is a simple tool that works miracles if you are able to satisfy your own needs and meet someone else's agenda at the same time. Don't make offers lightly, though. Make sure you can deliver—and then honor your commitments!
- *Learn to compromise.* Meeting someone half way can be an effective strategy if you gain sufficient ground to satisfy your own needs. Be careful not to give away too much, however. You don't want to regret your actions later, and compromising can also make you look weak if it takes you into territory that you are unhappy with.
- *Concede something.* This tactic rewards the other party with something you may not have planned on giving away, but it can give you the upper hand in another way. Because of the good will you have shown, you can call in a favor in the future or ask them to make a concession in another negotiation.
- *Use threats.* "If you don't agree, there will be dire consequences!" While influencing through fear may be effective in the short term, it can have disastrous long-term effects. You will create an atmosphere in which people cringe at the thought of working with you. This will not help build the kind of relationships that will secure your future success! It is also not far removed from coercion or manipulation.
- *Make a power play.* People who like to dominate a situation often use power as an influencing tactic. Bullies and overly aggressive types also like to use this method. Another way of making a power play is to use referential power, in other words, to threaten the wrath of another who holds more power than either of the parties in the negotiations. While this may be a useful tactic in an emergency, it doesn't build good working relationships over the long term.

End the Negotiations

When you have reached an outcome that is satisfactory to both parties, wrap up the proceedings. Then be sure to follow up with a written confirmation and actions that solidify your agreement. Brief anyone who will be affected so that they are ready to act on your plan and help move it along. At this stage you should try to foresee what could go wrong and take steps to ensure that it doesn't.

Keep Tabs On the Situation—and Don't Forget To Network

The best laid plans sometimes go awry, so it's important to make sure that everything is moving along as planned. Remain vigilant, monitor the situation on a regular basis, and step in again if you sense that things are getting bogged down, whether because of inertia, miscommunication, or sabotage.

Build good working relationships with influential people who are directly connected with or affected by the situation. You may need to call on someone for information, guidance, or support in the future.

What to Avoid

You Expect Others to Share Your Motivation and Enthusiasm

Yes, you have a lot of conviction, but no one likes to be bullied, and the more invested you are in getting your way, the more your audience will be put off. Instead of rushing into things headlong, convinced that your enthusiasm will carry the day, it is worth thinking about the context and the motivations of the other stakeholders. Spend some time planning your communication and don't expect instant gratification. Your timescale may not be the same as theirs.

You Become Dogmatic

Inflexibility as a negotiating tool is always a mistake. Be prepared to give a little to the other party as an indication of your goodwill and commitment to reaching a mutually satisfactory solution. Being stubborn and digging your heels in will only force the discussion toward a win-lose outcome. You don't want to end up using extreme tactics like bullying or threatening!

You Are Inauthentic In Your Tactics

Make sure that you are fully behind the outcome you seek to achieve so that your communication comes across as authentic. If you don't fully believe in the proposal yourself, you will not make a convincing argument and you risk undermining your own efforts.

You Are Too Easily Influenced

Don't be swayed by someone who has more power than you or who presents a dominating figure. You don't want to lose ground before you even start or to appear weak. Even if you basically agree with the other person's views and would like to support them, make sure you explore the situation from all angles. This way they will see that you are thinking about their arguments and considering them seriously. You don't want to look like a pushover!

Where to Learn More

Books:

Alden Conger, Jay. *Winning 'Em Over*. Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Huczynski, Andrzej. *Influencing Within Organizations*. Routledge, 2004.

Hale, Richard, and Peter Whitlam. *Impact and Influence: How to Market Yourself in Your Organization*. Kogan Page, 1999.

Bradford, David L., and Allan R. Cohen. *Influence Without Authority*. Wiley, 2004.

Borg, James. *Persuasion: The Art of Influencing People*. Prentice Hall, 2004.

Web Sites:

1000 Ventures, "Influencing people—The Art, Science, and Practice":
www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/crosscuttings/influencing_people.html

Impact Factory (search for "influencing"): www.impactfactory.com