

Leaders Influencing Others

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Abstract

Effective leaders do not accomplish the goals for which they are accountable without the support and actions of others. Influencing skills are key to leaders enlisting this support for their goals that prompts others to work to achieve them. Influencing is the leader's ability to persuade others to act in the way the leader desires. While leaders can accomplish some influence with others through the power of their positions, most influence is accomplished based on the merits of their interpersonal skills. In addition to influence and persuasion skills, social intelligence attributes from the positive psychology movement are essential for leaders to use in enlisting the commitment and efforts of others to achieve the goals for which they are accountable.

Key words: leaders, accomplishing goals, influencing, persuasion, social intelligence

1.0 Context

“Influence is the ability to persuade someone to think or act in the way you want. This ability is an essential part of leadership” (Community Tool Box, 2017, p. 2)

Influencing others to support a leader's efforts to successfully accomplish the goals for which the leader is accountable is essential to her/his success. The leader's “ability to advocate for one's goals and gain the required support” through effective interaction skills is a must in the modern-day work climate (Hansen, 2018, p. 119). A fundamental challenge of leaders is “getting things done through others” (Cialdini, 2001, p. 72). Bacon (2012) indicates that leadership should be viewed as “an act of influence” as opposed to an act of control, coercion, or dominance (p. ix).

The message is clear that leaders do not achieve goals by themselves alone. They must garner the support of others to be successful. Leaders who “go it alone” are destined for failure. Such action jeopardizes the success of the organizations. The leader must see others as collaborators rather than competitors (Maxwell, 2002). “Connecting to the power of other people” through influencing others is crucial for effective leaders to achieve the goals for which they are responsible (Kaplan & Marsh, 2018, p. 103).

2.0 Influence

In some situations, leaders can use *legitimate authority* to prompt others to accept their ideas and behave in a manner supporting these ideas. Legitimate authority is also referred to as *position power*. In the hierarchy, of an organization leaders have the prerogative to use adverse action toward staff members who do not follow their directives or demands. This is viewed as *compliance behavior* and is sometimes seen as *coercion* (Munduate & Medina, 2004). As Van Der Plight and Vlick (2017) indicate, “When in the presence of a legitimate authority figure, people feel obligated and ready to comply, even when it goes against their own personal convictions or preferences” (p. 80).

When leaders utilize legitimate authority or position power, they are demonstrating management as opposed to leadership. Management allows people in leadership positions to have *control* and, in essence, force change for those individuals who report directly to them. The bottom line is that, because of the dispositions of today’s staff members, leaders need to more frequently rely on their influencing skills—as opposed to legitimate authority or position power—to influence others to support their efforts. In a practical sense, this means leaders utilizing *attractiveness* in the context of positive persuasion in gaining the support of staff members for their positions, ideas, and desired actions. This approach requires leaders to take time to “bring others along” by providing them a feeling of ownership in the position, ideas, or desired actions.

It is important for leaders to take *time out* to think before reacting to a stimulus that can cause a negative and regretful, reaction that impedes influencing others. “External stimuli naturally cause us [leaders] to react quickly, and sometimes inappropriately” (Davis, 2017, p. 14). This is true not only for *in-person* interactions, but also for *electronic communications* such as tweets, emails, and texts. Many times, an email communication leads to misinterpretation of the intent and tone of the matter being addressed. Leaders need to be sure that they do not inadvertently create situations that negatively impact their ability to influence others by reacting too quickly in a negative manner. Covey (1989) notes that leaders should create *positive energy* which results in “enlarging and magnifying” their circle of influence (p. 83).

It is essential for leaders to be crystal clear about what they want their staff members to support and the actions which they should take. Leaders need to try to understand the likely perspectives of staff members—how and why they think as they do on an action for which influence is desired (Carnegie, 1936). As Carnegie observes in his benchmark book, How to Win Friends and Influence People, on influencing, “try honestly to see things from the other person’s point of view” (p. 186). Next, the leader should identify points in common with the other person’s thinking on the topic and uses them as a basis for influencing. Creating a perception of trust and authenticity with others will aid the leader in activities of the influencing process (Community Tool Box, 2017).

Bacon (2012) identifies 11 influencing techniques which leaders can utilize: (1) **Logical Persuading** by basing the message to influence on sound rationale and facts; (2) **Legitimizing** through applying authority or position power; (3) **Appealing to Relationships** by using others with whom the leader has previously established a positive relationship; (4) **Socializing** through getting to know others, being open and friendly, and making others “feel good”; (5) **Consulting** through seeking the advice of others by getting them involved in reaching solutions for the issue at hand and encouraging their ongoing input; (6) **Appealing to Others’ Values and Beliefs** by building commitment for support; (7) **Modeling** by behaving and emulating the way the leader wants others to act (role modeling); (8) **Exchanging** (giving-to-get) by trading cooperation for support of others—often implicitly rather than explicitly; (9) **Stating** through aggressively making it clear what the leader believes and furnishing the information to support it; (10) **Alliance Building** by using *collective support* through building cooperation and agreement among a team or group members; and (11) **Will** which is exemplified by the leader demonstrating achievement drive to relentlessly *stay the course* in order to gain the support needed (pp. 48-50).

A leader’s ability to influence others is not a fixed quantity; it can increase or decrease depending on effort and desire. Influencing skills of a leader can be acquired and enriched with adequate training, job experience, and desiring to do so. Leaders that have an adaptive mindset, represented by self-acceptance of who they are and accepting others in the same context, are more likely to develop and utilize influencing skills (Bacon, 2012). They should understand that successfully influencing others is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. If responsibility is not assumed by leaders and they forget to listen to others, “they may fall into a trap of arrogance, out of control egos, and insensitivity” (Cottrell, 2002, p. 87).

2.1 Persuasion

As Cialdini (2001) indicates, “Persuasion skills exert far greater influence over others’ behavior than do formal power [legitimate authority] structures” (p. 72). In reality, “no leader succeeds without mastering the art of persuasion” (Cialdini, 2001, p. 73). Persuasion is similar to influence, the difference being a leader does not have the availability of legitimate authority or position power to make threats or take adverse action influencing others. Persuasion means that leaders must rely on the merits of their appeal, including data and information to support the position they want others to accept. However, in practicality, the leader may be *perceived* by the persons that he/she is trying to influence as able to provide some benefits to them by the nature of the leader’s position.

Those whom the leader is attempting to persuade can vary greatly in their skills at: (1) processing the information being used to influence them and (2) their motivation to truly take the time and effort to understand the message the leader is sending them and behaviorally support it (Vargas & Yoon, 2004). Hence, some people are easier to influence than others, but not necessarily for the same reason. Leaders will need to assess the person they are trying to influence the two previously mentioned factors and adjust their efforts accordingly.

Leaders need to find the *sweet spot* of persuasion—that which interests and drives the other person to support the leader’s position (Heinrichs, 2007). It is essential that the communication (message) the leader is sending to others in an attempt to influence them is clear, credible, and, whenever possible, delivered in person (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012). A *rationale* with accompanying logic in the message is key to a leader in effectively persuading others (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Cialdini (2001, 2008) indicates that there are six laws of winning friends and influencing people in the context of leaders persuading others to support their desired actions:

1. **Liking.** People like those who like them. **Application:** The leader uncovers similarities with others and offers genuine praise based on them. Making as many friends as possible is an excellent platform from which a leader can influence others. Even when a leader may perceive more friends are not needed, the leader needs to continue on this friendship establishment path. (The leader can never have too many friends.) The leader should use informal situations to maximize “connecting” with others as a base for building friendships.
2. **Reciprocity.** People repay in kind. **Application:** Leaders need to give to others what they want to receive from them. Leaders need to be generous to others by providing kindness, attention, and even, at times, tangible things. Leaders should give assistance to help others, even when not obligated to do so.
3. **Social Proof.** People follow the lead of others similar to them. **Application:** Leaders need to use the *power of peers*’ concept to influence others. For example, influencing one member of a group or team can lead to that member influencing peers to support the leader’s position. The successful leader understands that people take “cues” from how others think as a basis for influencing them.
4. **Consistency.** Leaders cause others to commit to their desired actions. **Application:** Leaders cause commitments of others to be active, public, and voluntary in their support. Once people take a stand supporting the leader’s ideas, they tend to stick to it. Even when a commitment appears to be small, or even trivial, it can have a lasting effect on support for future actions of the leader.
5. **Authority.** Others can be impressed—persuaded—by the leader’s expertise. **Application:** Leaders need to demonstrate their knowledge in a matter-of-fact, non-bragging manner. Leaders should not assume that their expertise is self-evident to others.
6. **Scarcity** (also referred to as *exclusivity*). People want more of what is less available to them. **Application:** Leaders need to highlight the unique benefits and exclusiveness of the information and opportunities for others to be a part of what the leader desires because the “window of time availability” is closing. Others need to perceive that they should act now or the opportunity will vanish.

2.2 Social Intelligence¹

Social intelligence is a part of the positive psychology movement that focuses on attributes that can help people “be better.” Such intelligence is compared to much of psychology’s attention to aspects of people that are detrimental such as depression and addiction. Seligman (2011, 2006, 2002), who coined the phrase positive psychology in 1998, indicates that it has much to offer leaders in the context of their job satisfaction and that of others, as well as contributing to working more effectively with others.

Social intelligence is defined as a set of interpersonal competencies that inspire others to support the leader's efforts and goals to be accomplished through establishing positive relationships (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2013). "Meaningful [positive] relationships are invaluable for building and sustaining a culture of excellence" and for serving as a foundation for leaders in applying influencing efforts (Dalio, 2017, p. 339). Positive relationships cause a "connection between people that has real, tangible, and measurable power" that can be used for influence (Cloud, 2016, p. 6). Leaders must develop a genuine interest in developing the skills needed for causing *positive feelings* in those whose support and cooperation are necessary to complete the goals for which they are responsible.

Social intelligence advocates that being attuned to the moods of others affects the leader's performance as well as that of others. Leaders exhibiting a very caring disposition prompts the person with whom the interaction is taking place to be on the same *brain frequency* with them. Once *interconnectedness* takes place, the other person is more inclined to behave positively and want to support and work to achieve the goals identified by the leader. Some leaders have more natural talent in the area of social intelligence than others. Nevertheless, social intelligence can be learned.

Basic social intelligence skills germane to leaders maximizing influence are: (a) empathy, (b) organizational awareness, (c) developing others, (d) teamwork, (e) inspiration, (f) situational awareness, (g) presence, (h) authenticity, and (i) clarity (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2013; Riggio, 2014).

- **Empathy** means leaders being sensitive to the needs of others, demonstrating an effort to understand their particular situation, building connections between self and others, and identifying what motivates others. It focuses on establishing rapport.
- **Organizational Awareness** means leaders understanding social networks at work, being cognizant of their purpose and meaning, as well as unspoken expectations, and appreciating the culture and values of the general organizational and work units.
- **Developing Others** means leaders demonstrating interest and providing meaningful feedback that is helpful to them. This involves the commitment of personal time and energy in compassionate coaching and mentoring.
- **Teamwork** involves leaders providing psychological support for group members and creating a cooperative spirit in which everyone participates for the common good of the team. This includes providing support and demonstrating a personal interest in each team member.
- **Inspiration** is leaders communicating a compelling vision, building pride, establishing a positive emotional tone, and motivating individuals to do their best work.
- **Situational Awareness** means leaders utilizing skills in observing and understanding the context of a situation and the ways it dominates or shapes the behaviors of others.
- **Presence** is the overall impression or "total message" sent to others by a leader's behavior. Presence involves the inferences that others make about a leader's character, competency, and confidence based on the behaviors they observe.
- **Authenticity** is the extent to which others perceive the leader is acting from honest and ethical motives, the extent to which others sense that the leader's behaviors are congruent with what is advocated, and the extent to which others perceive that the leader is "playing it straight."
- **Clarity** is the leader's skill in expressing ideas clearly, effectively, and *with impact*. It includes paraphrasing, semantic flexibility, skillful use of language, timely use of metaphors, and explaining things clearly and concisely.

3.0 Concluding Thoughts

Leaders cannot operate as if they are on an island of their own. Influencing others to support and take actions to aid in the achievement of the goals for which a leader is responsible is paramount. This collaboration with others will benefit the overall effectiveness of the organizational work unit. Key influencing skills for successful leaders are building personal relationships, authentically seeking advice, appealing to others' values, exchanging cooperative and supportive behavior, and building alliances within and between team and group members.

Leaders need to identify the *sweet spot* of persuasion of others by discovering what will genuinely interest and drive people to support and work to achieve the goals for which the leader is accountable. Social intelligence skills such as creating an *interconnectedness* with others are also beneficial in influencing them and contributing to their working more effectively with others.

4.0 Footnote

¹This section is based in part on Bartz, D.E. (2017, September). Applying positive psychology to school administrators. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 4(8), 1-11; Bartz, D., Mattox, A., Johnson, C., & Hall, L. (2017, November/December). Emotional and social intelligence: How smart are you? *Leadership Matters*, 20-23; Bartz, D.E. & Karnes, C. (2018). School administrators establishing positive relationships with stakeholders. *American International Journal of Social Science* (In press).

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