

The Art and Impact of Influence

By **Garry Priam**

ART IS THE EXPRESSION OR APPLICATION OF HUMAN creative skill and imagination.

In that light, leadership is very much an art form and its skills include the art of influencing others. Since there is definitely a creative element to affecting human behaviour, influencing is much more an art than a science.

And while there is a science to be gleaned from great leaders, the plethora of words which surround them are uniquely emotive: commitment, focus, belief, courage, understanding, action-oriented, adaptability, experience, passion, trust, vision and resolve. All of this is integral to influence.

In Absence of Authority Alone

Moreover, leaders can be found at every organizational level, some with more authority than others; as experienced by HR professionals, this is where the art of influence becomes an essential skill set. It is in the recognition of what can be accomplished with the support of others that a leader hones this art.

There are many ways to lead and influence and set examples for others. In organizations, people traditionally look to their senior leaders for direction and guidance, much like a crew looks to their captain and officers. However, this obvious chain of command structure does not always translate in the more fluid, modern workplace.

While leaders need to envision the end result well in advance of achieving it, they must always be open to new ideas, methods and possibilities. Effective leaders welcome input from their teams and encourage creativity. By allowing yourself flexibility in your leadership role, you not only gain the respect of your team members, you also prevent yourself from getting locked into your own way of thinking.

Learn and Practice the Skills

Effective leaders, particularly in large organizations, quickly learn that “Positional Power”—the assumed authority or influence a person holds over others by virtue of his/her title—does not actually carry the weight one may think. Being “the boss” is simply not enough when you need people across an organization to meet and exceed strategically key goals.

Learning how to influence people without relying on your place at the top of the organizational chart defines the art of leadership, as well as the reality through which HR has evolved. This is an imperative skill to master, as the ability to successfully

influence can be the difference between leaping towards your strategic objectives or struggling to get things done.

Influence vs. Manipulation

Nevertheless, keep in mind there is a critical difference between influence and manipulation. The main difference between the two lies not in the techniques we use, but in how and why we use them.

A few key points to bear in mind to stay on the fair side of influence:

- Avoid deception and practice transparency;
- Avoid self-interest and bids to gain power for your own benefit;
- Model yourself as a teacher and help others; and
- Build strong relationships to be a positive influencer.

Different By Design

Most importantly, all of these “soft” practices are being shown to underlie the firmest foundations for organizational futures. According to a report by Deloitte based on more than 7,000 survey responses in over 130 countries around the world, what is needed is “The New Organization: Different by Design.” This incarnation of commerce is built around highly empowered teams, driven by a new model of management, and led by a breed of younger, more globally diverse leaders.

To lead this shift toward the “New Organization,” CEOs and HR leaders are focused on understanding and creating a shared culture, designing a work environment that engages people, and constructing a new model of leadership and career development. In competition for skilled people, organizations are vying for top talent in a highly-transparent job market and becoming laser-focused on their external employment brand. Executives are embracing digital technologies to reinvent the workplace, focusing on diversity and inclusion as a business strategy, and realizing that without a strong learning culture they will not succeed.

Amongst these changes, HR professionals are taking on new roles as the strategic stewards and designers of these new people processes. The mission of the HR leader is evolving from that of “chief talent executive” to “chief employee experience officer.” HR is being asked to simplify its processes, help employees manage the flood of information at work, and build a culture of collaboration, empowerment, and innovation. This means that HR is redesigning almost everything it does—from recruiting to



performance management to onboarding to rewards systems.

To do this, leading HR professionals are upgrading their skills to include design-thinking, people analytics, and behavioural economics. Coupled with the artful influence for which top HR leaders are renowned, this puts the profession and its impact on the organization in a greater role of influence than ever.

Six Keystones for Effective Influence

Sharing the fundamentals of that art with others throughout an organization can only grow the greater good in terms of communication, collaboration, innovation and end results. Here are six keystones for raising the art form:

1. Empathy: Take a moment to understand the issue or opportunity from the other person's point of view. Think more of "What's in it for them" and less of "What's in it for me." What drives them? What organizational forces affect them? Considering the viewpoint of the other person is not only key to successful influencing, it also helps solidify that you have more than your own interests at heart.

2. Intent: In each situation, think about why you want to influence someone. Clearly define how your desired outcome will benefit the other person, your organization and yourself. Think of the other person as a potential ally as this creates a good context for successful influencing. It also helps ensure that you are not letting selfish motivators—like being "right"—get in the way of influencing.

3. Authenticity: Be yourself. People can tell when you're being deceitful, so take a risk and be open and honest about what you are trying to accomplish. Consistently coming from a place of authenticity makes you more likeable, relatable and credible. Bear in mind that the degree to which the other person likes you correlates strongly with successful influencing.

4. Reciprocity: All boats should rise and fall together. This is about giving as much as you take. If a relationship becomes unbalanced in this regard, it can become strained; continuing to push your influence where reciprocity isn't strong verges on manipulation.

5. Trust: Trust is a key differentiator between influence and manipulation. When influencing others, aim for two things:

- Strengthening your relationship with the other person; and
- Achieving an ideal outcome.

Building trust by being respectful and honest in each interaction creates ongoing goodwill, which makes it easier to utilize your influence going forward.

6. Mindfulness: Mindfulness calls upon the practice of observation without judgment with a focus on our minds and inner voices. Mindful practices include daily meditation, prayer, jogging alone or journaling. In a fast-paced world, mindfulness enables you to clear your mind of clutter, focus on what is important, and be creative. It wakes us out of autopilot and brings our focus to the forefront in each interaction.

The Impact of Influence

Essentially, influence boils down to how people see us as individuals, how well our ideas resonate with others and how well we frame our ideas in terms of others' needs and problems. Strong influence can give you access to people's hearts and minds—the ultimate resource in becoming most effective as a leader in your organization.

Simply put, we as leaders are about people and helping them. We work with many tools like laptops, tablets, smartphones, but only in the service of solving problems for people. If we lose sight of the human element of our jobs, we run the risk of losing our own way.

As a leader, understanding human behaviour and how the people you are working with will act, or react, in certain circumstances is essential. You can make your life as a leader a lot easier by spending time getting to know the people you will be leading. When you're aware of their likes and dislikes, their dreams and aspirations, the task of influencing their behaviour becomes much easier.

In conclusion, your people look to you as a leader for your guidance and support. If people feel like they are working with a positive and open leader, they will pull their weight even more. This kind of synergistic reciprocity affects retainment,

fuels buy-in and enhances working relationships. Through mastering the art of influence you are helping steer the ship while allowing new courses to be plotted and fresh horizons to emerge—for you, your crew and the work you do. 

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