

Leadership and Influence

Influence is a critical component of leadership, and yet, people often ask what is it, how is it used, and how can they increase their sphere of influence within organizations? Improving your ability to influence effectively is a worthwhile pursuit, as it can lead to greater employee engagement and better business results.

In contemporary organizations, the ability of leaders to influence and win commitment is increasingly being relied upon. In fact, the impact of commitment gained through meaningful and value-driven influence, as opposed to doing what's mandated, is critical in mobilizing teams to connect to greater purpose.

Influence is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the power that somebody has to affect other people's thinking or actions by means of argument, example, or force of personality." So, influence is about power, but the way that power is gained varies, as do the ways in which others respond to those efforts. Influence is not effective unless you get the right response.

In organizations, power is gained either through position or via relationships. Those in formal positions of authority often see themselves as leaders, while those not in power may not see themselves as leaders, although they have the potential because they have the ability to exert power through influence.

To move anything significant forward, leaders must give full attention to the quality of relationships. Margaret Wheatley suggests that a core principle for developing relationships is to ensure people are engaged in meaningful work together. The intent of the influence has to be seen as valuable and important, which requires openness, honesty, integrity and the ability to engage others in debate and discussion. "Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world" M. Wheatley.

This is where other leadership qualities play a role in influencing effectively. Individuals who are respected and seen as credible are the ones most capable of bringing others along, and leaders who have a vision that engages others in something that tugs at their own values – and their desire to belong to something that matters – will significantly boost results. Often, an individual's intention as they attempt to exert influence will determine the outcome. It takes concerted effort and desire to engage others fully to ensure commitment – which is the difference between power over and power with.

Ultimately, people respond to others' efforts to influence them in one of three ways: by resistance, compliance or commitment. Resistance is a sign that the effort has been ineffective, whereas compliance means that people are willing to go along with the request, but with little heart or engagement involved. Power over others usually results in either resistance or compliance.

Commitment, however, is the best possible result. When people are committed, they are willing to go the distance and engaged in the cause, which ultimately creates outstanding results for organizations. Only effective influence results in commitment.

In other words, leadership is about influencing through relationships for a purpose that is grounded in common values. To influence others responsibly demands that values be honoured and the position of power not be abused or leveraged for the sake of achieving selfish or unlawful gains. This darker side of influence cannot be equated with leadership.

Influential leaders, regardless of title or position, are credible and respected, self-aware, confident and humble. They have achieved results so that, even when others may be skeptical or cautious about the new endeavour being proposed, they are willing to follow because of their relationship with the leader.

Consequently, those not in positions of authority need to get over any self-imposed limitations of powerlessness and crank up their influencing skills. Senior folks, on the other hand, often have to overcome the hurdle of their perceived power to dig under the surface and uncover whether compliance or commitment lies behind the “yes” they hear from others.

Tips for organizations:

- Invest in relationship-building. Put others’ needs before your own, find commonalities, take time to listen and ask questions.
- Find out about others’ beliefs, attitudes and values. Know the person who comes to work, not just the worker.
- Check out your credibility and expand if needed. This demands being believable and reliable. Do what you say you are going to do and be honest about what you can’t do.
- Use a blend of tactics to influence others: logic (appealing to intellect), heart (appealing to emotions) and hands (appealing to cooperative efforts).
- Use influence responsibly and only to mobilize actions and plans that you believe in and value. Pay attention to your own energy and passion. Your enthusiasm will take you further than fancy selling or persuasion techniques. Be real.