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Positive Influence: How Leaders Get Others to See It Their Way

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Influence is an essential component of leadership, especially in today's organizations, which rely less on hierarchy and more on the leader's ability to get buy-in from others. Attempts to influence can produce three different outcomes: resistance, compliance, and commitment—with the latter, of course, being the most desirable result. Here's a look at the three types of influencing tactics that are most effective at winning commitment.

Recognition of the importance of influencing skills for effective leadership is nothing new. In his book *Human Nature and Management: Application of Psychology to Executive Leadership*, educator Ordway Tread wrote that, "Leadership is the activity of influencing people to cooperate toward some goal which they come to find desirable and which motivates them over the long haul." That book was first published in 1933. Yet with today's trend toward "flatter" organizations, the rank of influence among the essential components of leadership has never been higher. Contemporary organizations have adopted flexible and interactive structures that rely less on hierarchy and more on leaders' ability to influence and win commitment.

Influence is important because it achieves desirable outcomes. Leaders need it to sell ideas and to motivate people to support and implement decisions—sometimes the leaders' own ideas and decisions and sometimes those of others whom the leaders represent. A leader's position in an organization and the power it gives him or her may not be enough to influence people and motivate them to complete a task. Leaders can use their influencing skills strategically to communicate their vision, align the efforts of others in the organization, and build commitment to the work at hand.

Leaders who use influencing skills effectively can achieve their goals and objectives more successfully than others do. But what does it mean to use influencing skills effectively? To understand the answer to that question, leaders need to know that influencing tactics can produce three distinctly different outcomes: *resistance*, *compliance*, and *commitment*.

The least desirable outcome of trying to influence others is resistance to the request or proposal the leader is making. People may directly oppose what the leader is asking for or stealthily resist it, perhaps subtly sabotaging the leader's efforts to influence. For example, they may initially agree with the request but then put up roadblocks to its completion or make excuses about why the task can't be accomplished. Compliance is better than resistance, but it's hardly an ideal response. The people the leader is trying to influence will carry out the request but with minimal effort and little if any acceptance of the reasons the leader has given to gain support. Compliance may be sufficient when the proposed action is simple and routine and doesn't require people to exert much additional energy or effort to accomplish it. But it's important for leaders to remember that although they can get people to act productively by securing their compliance, that won't change people's attitude toward the work itself.

When influencing efforts result in *commitment*, the leader has succeeded in presenting sufficient reasons to achieve people's voluntary endorsement and support for carrying out a task. This is an important distinc-

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tion, and it's vital to win commitment when what the leader is asking for requires people to take on jobs that may not be simple or quick and may have negative effects on their personal time or work schedules. When leaders are able to influence people to adopt the level of commitment, several advantages are realized:

- There is less need to monitor progress toward the goals or fight resistance to them.
- There is greater sustained effort, which is particularly important when the tasks involved are complex or difficult and require a concentrated effort over a long period of time.
- People endorse the objectives, so they tend to be more efficient, creative, resilient, and focused on the shared goal.
- Working relationships improve.

Developing influencing skills can help leaders achieve

Commitment

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Developing influencing skills can help leaders achieve commitment from their peers, direct reports, and bosses. These groups often require different approaches for influencing tactics to be successful. Whether leaders are attempting to influence a key individual, a specific group, or whole departments, their first step toward getting commitment should be to consider individual personalities, goals and objectives, and organizational roles and responsibilities.

TACTICAL MOVES

Understanding their own influencing style is critical to leaders' success. The first step in that understanding is assessing the influencing tactics they currently use. In general, leaders can choose influencing tactics that depend on logic, appeal to emotions, or support a cooperative effort. Following is an overview of these three kinds of influencing tactics.

LOGICAL APPEALS

Logical appeals seek to align with people's rational and intellectual positions. When using these tactics, leaders present an argument based on two different but important types of benefits—organizational and personal—that people will gain if they agree to the action the leader is proposing. Here are some examples of such tactics:

- *Objectively and logically explain the reasons for the requested action.* One of the most powerful and persuasive incentives for people to agree to a request is simply that it makes sense. This tactic relies on two critical components to minimize resistance: that the leader has done sufficient research and thinking prior to the attempt at influencing and that the leader is able to explain the request in such a way that it comes across as a clear and compelling argument.
- *Offer factual and detailed evidence that the proposal is feasible.* In their zeal to persuade people, leaders should avoid focusing on what's possible under ideal conditions and instead explain benefits as they exist under actual conditions.
- *Explain clearly and logically why the proposal is the best of all possible choices.* Another compelling and influential argument that leaders can make is that they have thought through several other options in addition to their own. Explaining that they have carefully considered the advantages and disadvantages of other approaches makes it easier to make a case that their plan most completely meets the objective.
- *Explain the logical process by which potential organizational problems or concerns will be handled.* Allow people to ask

questions, indicate problems, and voice their concerns about the proposal. Listen calmly and carefully, and avoid getting defensive or interpreting people's concerns or questions as resistance. Remain flexible—the problems or concerns might be ones you had not considered. They may also be an expression of people's natural anxiety about the changes the proposal might bring, and that anxiety will need to be addressed if the proposal is to move forward.

- *Explain how a requested action, which may require people to put in additional work, is likely to have long-term benefits for their careers.*
- *Provide opportunities for people to learn new skills through the proposal.* This can be a motivator for people to get behind the request.

EMOTIONAL APPEALS

A second major category of influencing tactics involves ideas that carry the leader's message by relating it to an important emotional motivator. An idea that promotes people's feelings of well-being, service, or sense of belonging has a good chance of gaining support. Here are some examples of such tactics:

- *Show people how the requested action meets their individual goals and values.* People look for alignment between their own goals and values and those of the organization. Leaders should present proposals in such a way that people will understand that their support will help achieve such alignment.
- *Describe the task with enthusiasm, and express confidence in people's ability to accomplish it.* It's rare to find someone who doesn't want to be thought of as capable and skilled. Even so, different people prefer to receive encouragement in different ways. If leaders deliver support at the right level, it makes it easier for people to get behind a request—either because the leadership support gives them the confidence they need to carry out the request or because they feel empowered by having been given an assignment they must complete themselves.
- *Link the request to a clear and appealing vision that people can fully support.* Aligning the desired action with a previously established vision can provide the motivation people need to carry out the request.

COOPERATIVE APPEALS

The power of cooperative appeals is that they build a connection between the leader, the people he or she is trying to influence, and other stakeholders in the organization that results in buy-in for the proposal. A proposal to work together to accomplish a mutually important goal extends a hand to others in the organization and is an extremely effective way to influence. Further, these tactics illustrate that influencing is not always a linear process that flows from one person to another. Rather, it is often reciprocal—flowing back and forth and yielding ideas, plans, and decisions that are better than any individual's original ones. Here are some examples of such tactics:

- *Provide the necessary resources—time, staff, materials, and technical support, for example—that people need to accomplish the task.* Leaders' willingness and ability to provide the help needed to accomplish a proposed task is an important factor in determining whether people will commit to the goal. What leaders have to offer often depends on their position and access, but the more they can offer, the more likely people are to follow through on the request.
- *Reduce the difficulty of carrying out the request by removing barriers to success.* Part of supporting people who have agreed to take on a task is removing barriers to success or reducing the difficulty of carrying out the request. It's important for people whom the leader is trying to influence to see that the leader is working on their behalf.

- *Volunteer to help people accomplish the task.* By doing so, leaders model their motivation and genuine interest in the success of the project, and people will be more likely to commit to it.
- *Offer to help people with their regular work.* Pay attention to areas where people might be experiencing stress in their current work situations, and offer to provide support. (At the same time, leaders should avoid overcommitting or trying to help in areas not in their sphere of expertise.)
- *Ask for suggestions on how to improve a tentative proposal in order to create a win-win outcome for everyone involved.* Ideally, leaders need to be flexible about the final outcome, but this isn't always possible. The organization may hold the leader responsible for a task that when completed affects other people. Yet those people may not have been consulted on whether the right decision was made. In these situations it's important for leaders to provide whatever support they can to help people align with the organization's direction.
- *Ask people for ideas on how to carry out the requested action, and incorporate those ideas into the process.* People are more likely to commit to an idea after they have been involved in choosing how it might be accomplished. When leaders do ask for input, they should follow through and make adjustments to their proposals to accommodate people's ideas. To do this, leaders have to work closely with those who have submitted ideas to decide whether their suggestions are practical and feasible. This allows leaders to guide expectations in an open way so that the final plan is more likely to meet everyone's needs.
- *Thoughtfully reflect on and respond to people's concerns and suggestions.* Listen, listen, listen. In this stage, leaders gather additional data that if not attended to could show up as reservations on the part of other stakeholders further down the road. Thank people for their input, build effective feedback skills, and practice them at every opportunity. You don't have to wait for a feedback situation to arise to review your skills. For example, the next time you attend a trade show and hear a compelling presentation, think about what you are experiencing that makes the presentation so valuable. Observe the speaker and take note of the situation,
- *Before making a specific request, ask people for their opinions on the general topic.* Influencing takes time—it is about planting seeds and growing them. Leaders should look for situations in which they can bring up their ideas for further examination and buy-in. When leaders feel that the time is ripe and they have established enough buy-in by incorporating people's feedback, then they can share their specific requests.
- *Create coalitions with people who support the requested action.* Contemporary organizations have adopted a more horizontal structure, which means that few decisions are made without involving multiple stakeholders. As a result, building coalitions of support has become critical to success. An effective influencing tactic is to locate and involve strategic stakeholders who are aligned with the proposal and thus provide a broad base of support.
- *Inform people about credible stakeholders who support the requested action.* Leaders should be careful about dropping names, but when given permission by these recognized and respected backers, should mention them to others, along with an explanation of why they stand behind the idea.
- *Involve credible stakeholders in the influencing effort.* Which leaders in the organization do people really listen to and trust? Ask them to promote the proposal through public endorsements.

- *Develop strategic alliances by networking with key stakeholders who can help develop the influencing strategy.*
- Building a well-established network takes time and continual maintenance. Look at every interaction, e-mail, and public discussion as a means to that end.

Influencing is not always a
Linear Process
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to another.

THERE WILL BE A TEST

Influencing others isn't easy. For leaders, it involves not only learning and practicing influencing tactics but also assessing themselves as messengers—a factor of their interpersonal and communication skills. Further, successfully influencing people to endorse an agenda or commit to a desired goal doesn't always happen immediately. Each individual whom a leader attempts to influence has to carefully consider the costs and benefits involved

with agreeing to the proposal. So the leader's flexibility and adaptability will be tested.

Leaders can get better at influencing by using a mentor, colleague, or coach to help develop their influencing skills. Seek out influential people in the organization. Observe what they do and say and how they handle their influencing opportunities. Talk to them about their influencing tactics and how they developed them. If leaders stay in touch with their own strengths and weaknesses, strive to develop rarely used skills, and turn every influencing opportunity into a learning experience, they can greatly enhance this crucial leadership capability.

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