

Influencing – an art form or a way of being?

Alasdair Cant goes through the basics of successfully achieving influence

The art of influencing has the air of something akin to a 'dark art'; mysterious at best, possibly manipulative and underhand at worst. In reality it is simply less tangible than many other workplace skills; more a dynamic process than an list of dos and don'ts. For example, when reading about influencing, the word 'proactive' appears again and again. I interpret this as simply being bothered enough to do something that might affect the outcome in the way we want. People who influence well don't sit around and hope things will change and nor do they just moan. They do and say things earlier rather than later, using well practised interpersonal, communication and assertiveness skills.

The origin of the word 'influence' is interesting. From the term 'influere' meaning 'to flow in', it suggests more about positioning rather than power, privilege or persuasion as is so often assumed. If we think about our position in relation to the person we are trying to exert influence on, there are a few critical questions we might

ask ourselves. These questions should help us get on that person's wavelength as far as possible. This preparation in advance involves some simple intelligence gathering and personal mental preparation about how we can adapt our own way of being, to relate to another person. Such questions might be:

- **How** do they relate to the world?
- **When** is the best time to try to communicate with them?
- Closely related to this is **where**?
- **Who** do they seem to respond to best, or listen to?

By listening carefully to someone, there are often clues about how they like to communicate. Let's say you wish to influence someone on the board of your organisation. You may pick up that she likes to read everything in advance and uses expressions that indicate she responds to the written word, such as 'I read something about that ...', 'Why don't you drop me a line about that ...'. She may well be less responsive to informal chats and doesn't like to be bounced into a decision. Instead, a

carefully worded document or letter in advance would be well worth the investment of time. In contrast, you may be aware that another person on the board struggles to read everything in advance, and seems to respond more positively to written overviews and concise bullet points. Think about adjusting your written style accordingly. Others may prefer verbal communication, and respond best when spoken to directly. This is usually given away by their body language. When other people are talking at length, do they fidget, seem distracted and generally convey impatience? This gives a strong clue as to how you might approach them. Again, adjust your style here. Be concise, even to the point of being clipped.

Most people respond well when you are honest – they sense you are genuine even if it makes you appear vulnerable. For example, when negotiating among peers, you may be tempted to appear strong and push early for what you want. However, this often leads to entrenched positions. Instead, be open about difficulties





early on, then listen to other views. More often than not, you discover these are shared problems. So, you contribute to reaching an understanding through collaboration, rather than assume others will see things as you do. This kind of discussion influences change hugely. It gets away from focusing on my solution or your solution, and we start to negotiate around a range of possibilities – *our* solution. To do this effectively you also need to be concise (others appreciate it if you don't ramble on and on) and clear (what you say is thought out, structured and therefore coherent). Linked to this is pace. If the person you wish to influence talks fast or slow, think about adjusting your own speed a bit accordingly. This is not being false but rather it is empathic and works best when it happens unconsciously. There is no harm in deliberately adjusting your delivery to attune with the person on the receiving end.

'Flowing in' suggests aligning with or being in harmony with someone. To influence well does not require being in agreement with someone, and certainly not pretending to do so. However, it does demand that we make the effort to at least get on their wavelength. There are countless ways of doing this. You can adapt your personal style when you are aware of the impact you are having on someone, while still being true to yourself.

An obvious example is by taking sufficient interest in someone so that you genuinely try to see the world through their lens. Let's imagine you wish to have more fruitful discussions with a colleague in another organisation with whom you have to

collaborate on a particular project. You may not like the person or have much in common with them. If you wish to influence them, then extra effort is needed. Of course you may do this by skilful persuasion, but influencing also requires investment of time early on.

An informal chat before meetings, at the pub and so on is a precious opportunity to find out what is important to that person. For example, they mention they are passionate about a particular football team. You don't need to be the slightest bit interested in football to show interest and find out more. Three weeks later you meet up. You take the trouble to ask about or comment on the team. This is a small but significant sign that you have listened and that the person matters to you. It can make a real difference when you get into the more substantial parts of any negotiation.

Finally, when I encounter people I think influence well, what strikes me is that they get what they want but they don't seem selfish in their behaviour. They trust their instincts and they have the courage to follow them. This is an intangible, but magnetic quality that other people are drawn to.

Learn more about negotiating, leading and influencing at Make Friends and Influence People, Alasdair's up-coming AMA workshop. For more information and to book go to www.a-m-a.co.uk or e-mail anna@a-m-a.co.uk.



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