

Leading Without Positional Power



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Influencing others when you have no direct authority over them has become de rigueur. Even those with impressive titles indicating formal authority still have to influence certain constituencies.

Daniel de Vries, Program Manager Special Projects, Johnson & Johnson Consumer Products, agrees. “This is the fastest growing leadership scenario, with an explosion in project management and matrixed organizations. The only way to succeed in today’s interlinked world is to develop the ability to lead and influence without having direct authority.” **Donna J. Sturgess**, Founding Partner, Buyology Inc. and former Head of Innovation, GlaxoSmithKline states, “Influence requires you to flex different leadership muscles. People who frame issues and opportunities in a way that enlists people’s support will be the stars of the flat organizations of the future.”

How do you effectively address situations when you’re not in charge? Focus primarily on what is within your control and influence. Don’t get sidetracked by issues beyond your control and influence. This will ensure forward momentum and markedly less frustration.

One coaching client wanted to increase her influence effectiveness. Business partners were extremely pleased, but management had concerns with peers’ perceptions of her. Rather than rail against the unfairness/inaccuracy of those perceptions, she concentrated on what she could control and influence. She paid attention to her attitude, prepared for meetings and how best to respond ‘in the moment’ and started meetings with small talk (not her preferred approach). After meetings, she ‘teed up’ outcomes to management by acknowledging peer input and emphasizing collaboration. Within a year, this manager was positively influencing her peer group and was promoted.

Kristin McCabe, General Therapeutics Sales Professional with sanofi-aventis, emphasizes, “Although other teammates are more experienced and possess senior level positions, I never hesitate to share ideas and product-selling initiatives. Taking ownership of potential customers and providing fresh selling strategies will aid my team. Demonstrating leadership and accountability will open doors to greater levels of responsibility.”

Sturgess recommends to “start by listening; people will engage when your objectives and agenda coincide with theirs. The alignment of objectives is a powerful tool.” When de Vries was asked how he overcomes situations in which he is not in positional power and yet needs to impact the outcome, he responded, “This is what I do everyday, pretty much the whole day. I always start with a clarification of expectations. Beyond that it all depends on the situation.”

Robert Cialdini, PhD, author of *Influence: Science and Practice*, specializes in scientific research and real-world application of ethical influence skills. I point out “ethical,” because Cialdini compares influence techniques to dynamite, a powerful tool that can be used for good or for evil. Cialdini’s six principles are:

- **Reciprocation:** Foundational to all human societies
- **Liking:** Can be activated by similarity, praise and cooperation
- **Social Proof:** When uncertain, people will look to see what others are doing
- **Authority:** Expertise and trustworthiness are key
- **Consistency:** People want to behave in agreement with the stands they’ve previously taken
- **Scarcity:** Opportunities that are less available strike us as more valuable

With these principles in mind, a US-based Vice President wants to influence his company’s non-US business units to implement a program that has been impactful in the US and offers value for their operations. Since he’s aware of a bias against US ideas, his approach includes:

- Forging personal relationships with individual presidents (liking)
- Providing success stories with this type of effort in non-US companies (social proof)
- Admitting the perceived “weakness” at the start — that the effort was started in the US — and sharing his credentials with this process (authority)
- Tying this effort to their own espoused values (consistency)
- Framing the potential loss of not pursuing this initiative (scarcity)

The VP anticipates piloting the program in a European country in the next few months.

While a framework of tactics will enhance success rates in influencing others, awareness of the idiosyncrasies of the situation is paramount. As de Vries emphasizes, “Do not choose one single approach to influencing others; it requires a lot of customization. Whatever approach you take, clarity of expectations is the starting point.”

It’s never too soon or too late to work on our influence skills. As McCabe points out, “Leading without positional power grooms employees like myself for a successful future within the organization.” **HBA**

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HBA Star Volunteer 2008 *Many ways: Volunteer friends quietly advise me about job challenges and new opportunities. Also, I learned how to lead before anyone would pay me to lead. Finally, volunteering has given me industry visibility and credibility I would never have had just from paid work.*