



Leading by Influence

Increasing influence with others

The ability to influence is an essential leadership skill. To influence is to have an impact on the behaviors, attitudes, opinions and choices of others. Influence is not to be confused with power or control. It's not about manipulating others to get your way. It's about noticing what motivates employee commitment and using that knowledge to leverage performance and positive results.

A leader's ability to have influence with others is based on trust; in fact, our influence expands in proportion to the amount of trust that exists in a relationship. Let's take a look at how leaders effectively build trust and increase their influence with others.

Establish credibility

Leaders begin to build trust by establishing their credibility. Stephen Covey, author of *The Speed of Trust*, described four foundational elements needed to establish one's credibility: integrity, intent, capabilities and results. Integrity is being honest; it's "walking your talk". Intent has to do with ensuring your motives are clearly understood. Capabilities are the skills and knowledge necessary to perform your job well. Results are what we accomplish, it's our track record—your ability to get done what you say you will do.

Stephen Covey said that credibility "boils down to two simple questions: 1) Do I trust myself? and 2) Am I someone others can trust?" By establishing credibility we begin to establish trust, which is an essential step in gaining influence with others.

Engage others and build a connection

Leadership is not a solo act. If you want to influence others, they have to be involved. Seek input on important decisions that will affect them individually or the team as a whole. Involve employees early on when proposing or implementing changes. Another way leaders increase their influence is through building connections with others. Seek to understand the needs, motivations, and values of others. By showing a sincere commitment to what matters to someone else you'll begin to build greater influence with them as they realize your actions include a genuine concern for their interests.

Why it matters?

People have a choice, and they decide each day how much or how little they will give to their job. Leadership alone provides a limited source of power and successful leaders recognize that in order to be effective they cannot rely solely on directive tactics. The outdated command and control method is rarely effective and often leads to resistance. As Ken Blanchard says "The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority."

Clarify expectations and practice accountability

To get great results, leaders must be able to enlist, persuade, and engage others. However, before expecting employee commitment, leaders must clearly delineate expectations. Define the results and clearly communicate them to others. Once the results have been defined practice accountability. Hold yourself and others accountable to the expectations. When leaders fail to clarify expectations and do not practice accountability they contribute to and unintentionally create a low-trust environment where mediocrity is the norm. This directly impacts your ability to positively influence others.

Share your passion

One of the reasons why passion is so important is that it produces energy; it ignites others. There is a contagious quality to passion. Passion is not something you can fake. It must be real and authentic. In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner state “If a leader displays no passion for a cause, why should anyone else care”.

Research has shown that one of the traits people admire most in leaders is their ability to be forward-looking. It’s not enough for a leader to have a vision, he/she must be able to communicate it and get others excited about it and supporting it. Effective leaders influence others by sharing their enthusiasm and excitement.

Be open to influence

Influence should be reciprocal. One of the quickest ways to increase your influence with others is to be open to influence yourself. This means truly demonstrating openness. Be willing to listen to others’ ideas, invite and consider alternative viewpoints. Make use of others’ skills and expertise. By displaying openness you’ll begin to build respect and trust with others and that will increase your influence.

Conclusion

Leadership has been described as the ability to influence others. An effective leader moves followers into action not with coercion but by eliciting their desire and conviction in the vision and goals articulated by the leader. Misused influence can bring about catastrophic results. But properly channeled, positive influence can bring about great change as individual actions align with group efforts to produce gains that grow exponentially. A leader, who, through focused and deliberate effort, exerts positive influence in others, will build trust and become a true driving force toward excellence.

References:

Covey, Stephen M. R. and Merrill Rebecca R. 2006. *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Kouzes, James M., and Barry Z. Posner. 1995. *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.