
THE POWER TO INFLUENCE

By Dennis Heath



In my executive coaching practice I encounter many clients who want to be *more* influential. **Influence** is often stated in terms of, "*It's not what you know, it's who you know*".

But in the context of corporate life, as managers climb the corporate ladder, they need to be able to exert influence regardless of the depth of their personal relationship with others. **Influence is needed to push ideas forward, gain acceptance for strategic plans, persuade investors to input more cash, shape policies, or simply to conclude a negotiation weighted in our favour.** Many books have been written on influence but in this short article I showcase some of the techniques that my clients have successfully adopted to improve their power to influence.

Put simply, someone is said to be influential if they have the ability to positively affect and shape the way other people feel about a topic or proposal by removing resistance and gaining support. When influence is skilfully exercised, objectives are achieved without duress and without conflict or protracted debate.

If we have an idea or proposal in mind that we believe is unquestionably valuable and 'the right thing to do', the temptation is to barge straight into a negotiation or presentation, with the firm belief that everyone else must surely feel the same way and be suitably excited when they hear our proposal. In reality, to use a rugby analogy, they often meet resistance and end up in a scrum, pushing hard against the opposition until they

eventually drop the ball and give up. **The reason for failure is the assumption that the people we intend to influence have the same agenda, needs, values and beliefs as we do.** These assumptions are invariably wrong.

One of my clients, a senior manager with a large corporation in the finance sector, complained that Board meetings were always a battle. They went on all day and he constantly met resistance to his ideas and assertions. He had to deal with so many "*difficult*" people. My client was a very dominant personality, very knowledgeable in his field and totally confident that his proposals to the Board were absolutely right and there could be no other sensible way to proceed. His assumption was that the other parties must surely see the sense in his ideas, to the point where challenging them would be unthinkable.

Through the coaching sessions he came to realise that, while his ideas and proposals had merit, he was merely transmitting them without any thought as to how the other Directors might receive them when filtered through their own values, beliefs and agendas. The question then became, "How can I get to know what their filters look like, so that I can shape my message to fit?" **The secret is in the preparation before the influencing meeting.**

A week before his next Board meeting he circulated the agenda and telephoned each Director in turn, asking them questions about the agenda items. The questions were all simple, open questions, i.e. they could not be answered with a simple "yes" or "no". Typical questions were, "How do you feel about the proposal? What do you think of the idea? What appeals to you most about the new policy? What adjustments to this proposed new product do you think would make it perfect? What's your opinion on how the shareholders will view this change of direction?" By asking open questions a great deal can be discovered about other people's feelings and personal agendas. He listened very carefully to the answers (*active listening being a required skill in influencing*) and noted the responses. With the input he collected he was able to shape his proposals in a way that would appeal to each individual Board member and at the same time pre-empt objections. Unsurprisingly, his next Board meeting was very different to the previous ones. The meeting took half a day instead of a day and he gained approval for the majority of his plans without stubborn resistance or lengthy debate.

Another client encountered problems with "*difficult*" customers, to the extent that in one case, in an important negotiation, the senior

customer representative got up and walked out. As in the previous example my client was a go-getter, a forceful character who had no time for people who could not accept his perfectly reasonable proposals. He was on transmit most of the time and paid little attention to listening. He recognised that something had to change to avoid future disastrous meetings.

Prior to his next critical customer meeting he conducted some research into the personality, likes, dislikes, career history, business style and affiliations of the senior decision maker. The forthcoming meeting was a one-

shot, fail or succeed event, so the outcome was critical. The meeting was a greater success than he anticipated. Because of the way he was able to shape his proposal and hit all the decision maker's "hot buttons" he not only succeeded in the acceptance of his proposal, but the other party became an advocate for my client's ideas within the customer's organisation.

The key point to remember from these examples is that attempts at influence are more likely to succeed if you first make the effort to understand the drivers and values of the people you want to influence. As

the author of "**7 Habits of Highly Effective People**", Stephen Covey once said, "**Seek first to understand, then to be understood**".

About the author: Dennis Heath is an Executive Coach and founder/owner of WayAhead Leadership Solutions Pte Ltd, a company offering senior level coaching services across the Asia Pacific region. He is also accredited by the International Coach Federation (www.icfsingapore.org), the industry professional body regulating and setting standards for Coaches worldwide.

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