

Leading with Influence

A case for self-awareness
by M. Mohan Shukla, PMP

Executive Summary

While influencing others is the primary skill that differentiates effective leaders from average performers, it is difficult to learn. Acquiring influence requires the ability to understand the mental-emotional dynamics that drive decision-making and behavior. Influential leaders are adept in reading these subconscious dynamics in themselves and others, shaping their interactions to ensure a positive outcome. They consistently practice their skills in connecting with people's motivations and seeing through their cognitive filters. This enables them to help others overcome their fears and achieve alignment with the larger organizational purpose. They are more valuable to companies because they raise organizational capability which improves long term results.

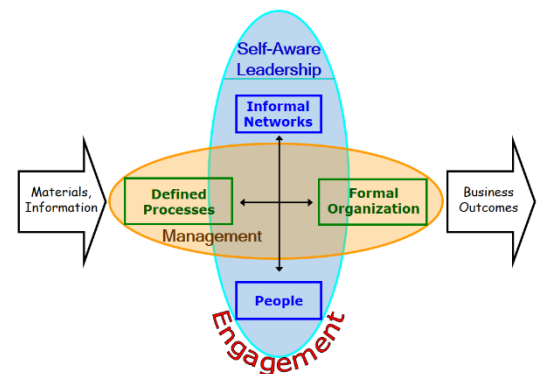
Influential leadership results in higher performance

The challenging cognitive demands of the complex work environment and the need for managers to deal with broad concepts necessitates that individuals in positions of leadership in organizations are generally high-IQ individuals. The band of competencies that top managers in organizations share is rather narrow. This makes it challenging for a leader to differentiate themselves from others in the peer group. How does an aspiring executive demonstrate their unique capabilities, when most of the others are also highly skilled in the common ones?

At the same time, studies of leadership effectiveness consistently conclude that soft skills are more important for the long term success of organizations than technical competence. One conducted at a global industrial company in 2001 compared the primary competencies of star leaders, those achieving superior business results, with those of average performers. Not a single technical or purely cognitive competency emerged that would differentiate between the two groups. The two top skills that correlated with business success were *achieving collaboration and teamwork*, and *ability to effectively lead teams*. In other words, the ability to influence people is the competency that enables success and also differentiates leaders.

The graphic here provides a context for such differentiation. The primary role of managers in an organization is to convert business goals into outcomes. To that end, they divide the requirements into defined work packages or activities and arrange a formal organizational structure to perform them. The knowledge area and skills required for this exercise come under the general purview of management. Planning, budgeting, production control, marketing and human resource management are examples of skills required to manage the enterprise.

Most organizations, however, have a complex and often hidden network of relationships that facilitates work that is required but is not formally defined. High performance organizations with influential leaders are able to achieve greater results by supplementing the formal structures with the passion, energy and effort of the people and the informal networks.



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Influential leaders focus on two sources for this leverage. The first is "discretionary effort" which is the voluntary investment of time and attention by employees beyond their contractual or unspoken obligations. They generate strong feelings of ownership and alignment with business goals. The employees' attention, more than their time, leads to creative solutions, higher quality work and often, exceeded expectations. That can make the difference between ordinary and extraordinary performance.

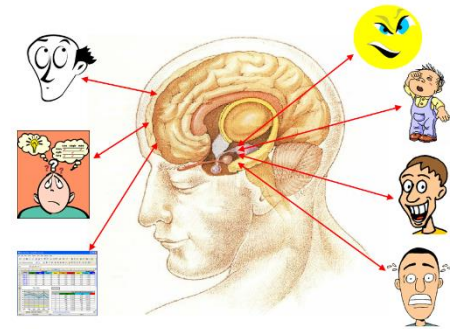
The second is tapping into the power of the informal networks to validate, inform, improve and reinforce actions and decisions made formally. In many organizations, a culture of exclusiveness creates silos that discourage alignment of goals across organizations. Influential leaders break through such barriers to collaboration and mobilize the hearts and minds of employees across organizational boundaries toward a greater purpose.

The challenge of learning influence

It is challenging, however, to develop the skill of influence in leaders. Studies of behavioral training reported in the *Academy of Management Journal* conclude that 90% of the people skills learned in classroom training are lost within three months. The reason lies in the functional design of our brain. Skills related to dealing with people are based in the *limbic* areas of the brain (seat of emotions) and best learned through experience and practice. Analytical and technical skills reside in the *neocortex* (thinking part of the brain) which learns quickly. It is essential to experience the process of influence in order to learn how to apply it. The key is to observe the role of mental-emotional factors driving it. However, most leadership training programs focus on cognitive content that targets the neocortex without actively engaging the limbic brain, with short term results.

The science driving influence

The neocortex, forming the thick outer shell of the brain, manages higher functions such as planning, coordinating and decision making. The limbic brain, placed in the middle, determines what we pay attention to and how we relate one thing with another. It also manages storage and retrieval of memory. This creates an interesting, even ironic dynamic. Even though the *thinking* brain is the executive and makes all decisions, the data on which the decisions are based is fed to it by the *feeling* brain. Hence our feelings and emotions control what we pay attention to, and what memories the previous thought will invoke. In effect, they decide whether the next thought will be for or against the idea being discussed. The limbic brain fundamentally determines whether a person will be influenced by another or not.



Thinking and Feeling areas of the brain

Inner speech

The subconscious part of the human brain is designed to analyze input it receives every second that we are alive. Two basic questions are asked of every single experience we have. First, the implication - "*what does this mean to me?*" and next, the application - "*what do I do now?*" This activity never ceases even when we are conversing with others or sitting quietly and thinking about something. The primary reason why listening is considered to be the toughest communication skill is the fact that we are always talking to ourselves while trying to listen to others. It takes a lot of practice to slow down this automatic activity.

When a person is listening to another speak, there is an inner dialog running inside their brain. The first question mentioned above analyzes every bit of information coming in and the second makes an immediate decision. This includes deciding whether to pay attention to the next bit of information or not. The limbic brain is continuously evaluating each word, gesture and tone and comparing it with previously stored experiences. The decision made will generally be positive if the analysis invokes positive physiology in the listener's body. If the answer to the subconscious implication question, "*what does this mean to me?*" creates a negative physiology, the listener will immediately lose interest.

The key to influencing others, therefore, is the evocation of positive physiology in them, engaging their attention and getting them to retrieve pleasurable experiences from their subconscious. The strength of an argument is cognitively important but *does not determine the outcome*. By successfully managing the underlying limbic processes driving the direction of the other person's thinking, one can effectively influence their decisions, behavior and performance. Influential leaders are highly self-aware, emotionally intelligent and trained in the art of reading others' responses in real time. They are thus able to shape their interactions with success.

Cognitive Filters and Distortions

Our brain receives billions of pieces of information every second, but can consciously deal with only a few thousand. It is thus designed to quickly and subconsciously filter out portions perceived as not useful or relevant at that moment. Over time, patterns of this automatic selection emerge and create neural schemas in the brain. Each successive event is thus filtered so that the conscious brain only perceives content that matches previous patterns, thus reinforcing these cognitive filters. True communication is so difficult to achieve for this simple reason - people see and hear only those portions of a communication that pass through their cognitive filters. The eyes and ears can send a signal to the brain, but it will be consciously recognized only if the neural maps allow it.

From a practical perspective, these filters often help people cope. Painful experiences tend to disproportionately contribute to their creation and people become comfortable with their protective filters. That is why they instinctively fight back attempts to "open up" even when they realize the damage in dysfunctional relationships and missed opportunities wrought by these filters. The most visible and measurable manifestation of these filters is the cognitive distortions that they program in the brain. Examples of these are seen in individuals who always forecast failure, exhibit binary thinking, complain constantly or blame others for all problems. The key to influencing others is the ability to recognize cognitive filters and flex one's communication to compensate for them.

Six engagement techniques to influence people

In his *Rhetoric*, the treatise on influence he wrote 2300 years ago, Aristotle described Ethos, Pathos and Logos as its three essential drivers. *Ethos* refers to the audience's perception of a speaker's fitness for their exalted status, while *Pathos* is the ability to create a positive emotional connection with the subject and *Logos* implies the rational component of their argument. The first three techniques described here encompass each of these drivers and the last three combine them together. The principles of influence discussed above are applied in the practices below, which provide a powerful framework for leaders in any field of endeavor to develop this critical skill.

Technique 1. Self-Aware Leadership

Purpose: Organizations sometimes fail in spite of doing all the right things, because the person at the helm does not inspire trust and faith that capability will translate into results. To be truly effective in influencing others, a leader needs to be seen as a person of integrity, competence and congruence. When a person demonstrates the ability to judge dispassionately, stand their ground and yet be willing to change with circumstances, stakeholders are apt to invest their confidence in that leader. Such individuals command the respect of the people they're working with and use it to inspire their teams and achieve higher goals. They constantly reinforce this reputation by following practices such as the following. This provides the *Ethos* for influence.

Practices:

1. Be highly self-aware and establish congruence in every aspect of your life, following ethical principles.
2. Extend your trust to others and be trustworthy in your actions.
3. Know your capabilities and limitations well and constantly flex the first and compensate for the second.
4. Have a clear vision and articulate it so everyone can see congruence in your decisions and actions.
5. Demonstrate competence by holding yourself and others to high standards.

Technique 2. Connecting with motivational drivers

Purpose: Great strategies and perfect plans often fail because the people responsible for executing the work did not connect with the goals. Proper execution of any plan involves hundreds or even thousands of small but quick decisions made by individuals far removed from the grand scheme. An emotional connection to the outcome improves the probability of a better decision being made because the individual will take the initiative to inform himself rather than let circumstances decide the outcome. Connection with people's motivational drivers provides the *Pathos* to ensure that their efforts will be targeted toward execution of the shared goals.

Practices:

1. Make sure people are engaged and not distracted before sharing critical information. [*Pay attention to their body language - is it open and accepting? Your own body language should indicate 2-way engagement.*]
2. Determine people's *true* motivation with open-ended questions. [*"why do you feel that way?"*]
3. When assigning important tasks, ensure that the person relates the objective to their own personal goals. [*"How do you see this as an opportunity to ... ?" "What can you do to demonstrate your skills in ... ?"*]
4. Validate people's alignment by asking them to make small decisions that reveal their motivational drivers. [*"What approach will you take to addressing this need, and why?"*]

Technique 3. Communicating through cognitive filters:

Purpose: Ineffective communication is a key reason for failure at every level in organizations. How often do you attend meetings where everyone agrees with a course of action, but later disagree about what it was? Even if the decision is written, the interpretation can be argued about. Influential leaders are aware of the cognitive filters affecting communication at every level and actively work around them. They achieve clarity of purpose and intent and align their stakeholders toward shared goals by following these practices. The critical skill is of establishing *Logos* in a way that overcomes cognitive filters on all sides.

Practices:

1. Ensure everyone's individual understanding of the purpose, intent and the path to success is synchronized. [*"How do you understand the goal and your role in it?" "How does that lead to the desired outcome?"*]

2. Encourage healthy debate to reveal all hidden agendas and evaluate multiple perspectives. [*"Here's the real reason I'm inclined this way. How do you see the situation differently? What other ideas do you have?"*]
3. Learn to listen for understanding and seek cues to filters affecting people's perception of a situation. []
4. Identify root cause behind a person's cognitive filters by digging progressively deeper. [*"Why do you feel that way?" "What makes you say that?" "How do you come to this conclusion?"*]
5. Perform a filter-mapping exercise using a skilled coach. [*Perspective Consulting's model uses "Behavior -> Mental Emotional states -> Desires and Attitudes -> Acquired Beliefs and Values" approach.*]

Technique 4. Converting difficult people to your cause

Purpose: Every organization has people that are critical to success but difficult to deal with. They may be judgmental, aggressive, passive-aggressive or constant complainers, and hurt the team's productivity as well as morale. They generally perceive every situation as a threatening one and the first step to success is entering their comfort zone, which takes a combination of the three strategies discussed above. Change can be achieved through a progressive process of breaking the barriers they erect around themselves, establishing trust and bridging their motivation to the desired result. Once their perception is aligned with the team's goals, behavior change follows.

A 5-step process to apply this strategy:

1. Engage the person's attention through acknowledgement and empathy. [*"This new decision means we all have to revise our plans. What do you think you'll be able to do?"*]
2. Conciliate to connect with their mental-emotional state. [*"You're already in a challenging situation. How do you feel about this new direction?" "What can we do together to make the change easier for you?"*]
3. Inquire to bridge their attention from how they feel to what they think - toward a solution. [*"Given these circumstances and our challenges, what can we do to achieve our goals? How can you help in that?"*]
4. Gain acceptance to the possibility of a different outcome and a method to test it and build confidence. [*"While this did not work earlier, we have a different ... now. Perhaps we can ... to see if the change is real."*]
5. Build upon the initial success by gradually increasing the level of collaboration and behavior change required with successive tasks. [*"Let's try something bigger now and see if this situation continues to hold."*]

Technique 5. Creating momentum

Purpose: Organizational efforts often fail not because of lack of planning or resources, but from the dissipation of initial energy and enthusiasm with which the initiatives were launched. Unless behavior change accompanies the systemic changes in a sustainable way, the likelihood of continued value generation over time is low. Behavior change is difficult to achieve because of the way our brain processes information. As a persistent remnant from the days of hunting-gathering, it views every new experience with suspicion, lest it threaten survival. Hence we experience internal pushback when asked to perform a new task, change the way a task is performed, or even to think about it in a new way. The following practices can overcome this mental-emotional inertia and help maintain momentum.

Practices:

1. Examine the reasoning for avoiding a task and challenge assumptions. [*"How do I/you really feel about this task? What about its execution or its outcome might cause me/you pain? How likely is that to happen?"*]
2. Monitor your inner speech to replace hindrance-oriented thoughts with action-oriented ones. [*From "There's no way I can do this" to "Have I ever done something remotely like this?" "How can I apply that experience here?"*]
3. Convert discussions on gravity issues (uncontrollable situations) to achievable goals. [*"There's nothing we can do about the economic situation. However, with the slowdown, we can now develop new skills we've not had time for."*]
4. Ask questions that generate success-consciousness rather than failure-consciousness. [*Replace "What will we do if don't find enough clients?" with "How many clients do we need to be profitable?"*]
5. Articulate a vision of the future state that people can connect with and identify some clearly achievable short term goals. Celebrate achievements to capture the positive emotion generated and build upon it.

Technique 6. Coaching for perspective

Purpose: Leaders of any large organization are rarely able to connect with and directly influence each individual on their team. The best way to multiply their influence is to build a self-propagating model where others carry the vision and energy across the organization. This requires coherent thinking and resonant behaviors among the champions who influence each individual. For this reason, effective leaders invest a significant portion of their time and attention in coaching others to develop a shared understanding of key principles and goals. Coaching for *perspective* develops the capability to size up any situation with clarity (free of filters) and hone in

on the true *actionable* drivers. This leads to quicker and more effective decisions that are aligned with the critical goals and the team's mission. Each of the strategies mentioned earlier is helpful in becoming a good coach.

Practices:

1. Learn to identify "coachable" moments. *[When an action or behavior is not aligned with the greater purpose.]*
2. Ensure that the other person(s) is (are) in a mental-emotional state to accept and appreciate the coaching. *[Deflate any emotional attachment to the situation and establish rapport. Emphasize the learning value of the exercise.]*
3. Explore the person's thoughts and feelings that led to the action or behavior by asking open-ended questions rather than focus on what went wrong. *["How did it feel when you ...?" "What stirred inside you to ...?"]*
4. Determine if any filters or cognitive distortions led to the behavior. Discuss what the person's response would have been in the absence of those filters. *["How do you think you would have reacted if you knew ...?"]*
5. Develop self-awareness and continually evaluate your self. *[Keenly observe your own mental-emotional state. Evaluate the relevance of your knowledge and capabilities. Monitor your results. Question your perspective.]*

Conclusion

Influential leaders attain extraordinary results by engaging people's discretionary effort and attention. The skills of influence are difficult to learn because they reside in the emotional brain, while most behavioral training focuses on the cognitive faculties. The six strategies described in this paper incorporate recent findings in neurophysiology and are easily applied in the work environment. Leaders who consistently follow them achieve outstanding results.

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