THE INFLUENTIAL DIFFERENTIAL

Why Some People Are More Influential Than Others
Let's face it, the truth about success in any organization has always been that decisions are made and results are produced because of the actions and power of influential people who inspire willing collaboration. In order to get results, you need to motivate any number of over-worked, over-booked people to commit their precious time and tightly budgeted resources to achieve someone else's objectives. Not a problem if you're an army captain overseeing a company of lower-ranking individuals. Your wish is their reality. However, in the civilian world, military-style "command and control" tactics are actually counter-productive. People won't lend a hand until we win over their hearts and minds. Earning peoples' buy-in on both an intellectual and emotional level requires the subtle strength of influence. Bradford and Cohen, in their classic work *Influence without Authority*, explain that in the 80's, when they first started writing about influence, they struggled to convince people of its importance. The current landscape looks much different. They describe it as such, "Today, we meet no one who works in an organization larger than 10 people who does not understand that gaining cooperation through influence is the lifeblood of contemporary work life."1

**The Influential Differential**

Accepting the fact that effective leadership requires influence naturally leads to the question of how business leaders can become more influential. Growing out of a rich garden of social influence studies is a harvest of tools, processes, techniques, and methods explaining what influential people do. Becoming more influential should be as simple as replicating the behaviors of highly influential people. Some leaders are able to take on this challenge with ease. Others begin the process only to find their "influence enhancement plan" neglected; gathering dust like a piece of exercise equipment purchased from an infomercial. So, why do some people succeed where others fail? Why are some people more influential than others? To use a Malcolm Gladwell term, what's the "tipping point"2 on the continuum of individual influence? Uncovering what lies in the space between being "not so influential" and "very influential" exposes the recipe for enhancing influence. Months of research plus years of experience in human resources and training have led me to conclude that the influential differential is a matter of C.I.T.—Choice, Intentions, and Trust. These three factors largely determine whether or not a person will successfully increase his or her level of influence.
Choice

Here are a few common leadership challenges. Do any of these sound familiar? Cross-functional team leaders often lament how difficult it is to get members to dedicate time to a project outside of their regular responsibilities. No matter how enthusiastic they are about working on the project, people remain fiercely loyal to their departmental duties. Managers find themselves wishing they could just "command" someone to comply. Speaking about another department that was unwilling to allow key specialists to work on outside projects, one person said, "Sometimes I wish I could just make them give us the resources." Account executives accustomed to nurturing a set of existing clients are dismayed when they are called upon to switch gears and bring in new accounts. A prevalent leadership challenge is getting vendors or strategic partners to meet shorter deadlines. The degree of challenge an individual will face in negotiating through these situations is inversely proportional to the individual's degree of influence. As Professor Michael Watkins explains, "Formal authority and the other resources of leadership are never sufficient to get things done. Leaders also need the power to persuade." Most business people will wholeheartedly agree with Professor Watkins. It's easy to recognize the need for and benefits of being more influential. Whether or not someone successfully increases his or her level of influence is largely determined by the answer to this simple question: Is the pain of the status quo greater than the pain of change?

Just about everyone has the potential to be more influential. The difficulty with influence lies to a great extent within us. Either we’re not sure what to do, or we choose not to do the things we know we should. Sometimes we think that the same technical expertise that made us successful in the past will ensure our future success. As Herminia Ibarra and Mark Hunter explain in a January 2007 “Harvard Business Review” article, "When challenged to move beyond their functional specialties and address strategic issues facing the overall business, many managers do not immediately grasp that this will involve relational—not analytical—tasks." Half the time influence is something we exert without thinking. The other half of the time we trip over ourselves on the way to using influence as effectively as we should. Although some people seem to be "born influencers", no amount of innate leadership qualities can make a person influential. Each person has to make a conscious decision to use those gifts for the betterment of the "greater good." In order to make that choice, you have to believe that the benefits outweigh the risk and/or effort.

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This is a crucial determination. Consciously working to improve your influence means more than just applying a particular process in certain situations, or mastering a few persuasion techniques. These processes or persuasion techniques will only take root if you've been tilling the soil and planting seeds long before you need the harvest. Becoming a person of influence is a lifestyle choice. It's a choice that entails changing the way we prioritize our time. It requires us to focus our energy on tasks and relationships that, in the past, had not gotten as much of our attention. For many of us, this type of change in operating style is difficult to implement. David Garvin and Michael Roberto explain why change is so hard. They state, "First of all, most people are reluctant to alter their habits. What worked in the past is good enough; in the absence of a dire threat, employees will keep doing what they've always done." Essentially, for you to pursue an influence improvement program to fruition, you have to create your own "dire threat." In your mind, the pain of the status quo has to be greater than the pain of change. Otherwise, when faced with a steep learning curve or the awkwardness of leaving your comfort zone, you will settle back into the security of familiar behavior patterns.

**Intentions**

Deciding to become more influential is a lot like committing to a weight loss program, time management regime, or work out schedule. It's going to require behavioral and attitudinal changes. The first step in the Influence Improvement Plan is to honestly assess why you want to be more influential. Are you doing this because you think it's the best way to further your career? Or, are you doing this because you think it's the best way for you to make a meaningful contribution to your organization? An individual's reasons for becoming influential have an enormous effect on his or her ability to inspire trust, affect decisions, and stimulate action. You'll notice a key phrase above, "for the betterment of the greater good." You have to want to influence for the ultimate good of the organization. Genuine care for the organization's goals and an honest concern for others make you credible and trustworthy. Professor Watkins tells us, "Leaders are better able to shape people's perceptions of their interests and alternatives when they are respected, considered trustworthy, and perceived to possess the experience to make good judgments."
If you operate with anything less than the purest of intentions, you will be seen as manipulative or self-serving. Any attempts to influence others will be thwarted or ignored. Think about a time when you knew someone was trying to influence you for their own benefit. How did you feel? Chances are you felt manipulated or “used.” How did you feel about that person? Actions driven by self-serving intentions are transparent and forceful. Influence, the culmination of actions driven by unselfish intentions, is a subtle way to achieve results. Dealing with a person who is jockeying for his or her own good leaves others feeling used and coerced. Being influenced by a person who is working for the greater good makes others feel like they are part of something important and meaningful. Elaina Zuker sums it up best, “Influence should be felt only in its effect, not by exertion of force.”7 So as you continue to work on your level of influence, remember to keep a finger on the pulse of your intentions.

Trust

Stephen M.R. Covey says, “The motive that inspires the greatest trust is genuine caring—caring about people, caring about purposes, caring about the quality of what you are doing, caring about society as a whole.”8 Coming to the table with the right intentions is a key ingredient for creating trusting relationships. The ability to influence others to commit time, energy, and resources to an initiative necessitates the existence of these trusting relationships. People are very rarely influenced by those whom they do not first trust. Many of the frustrating situations described earlier are symptomatic of too little trust between the parties. The team leaders, project managers, and sales people portrayed in those scenarios had not spent enough time with the people they were trying to influence. So, how much is enough time? There really is no prescribed length of time for getting one person to trust another. Trust develops between two people at a pace determined by many factors, including:

- how trusting each person is
- how well either side honors his or her commitments
- the nature of each person’s intentions
- whether or not they are listening to each other
- if they are respecting each other’s privacy and maintaining confidentiality
The time element of trust often becomes a stumbling block on the path to influence. Influence requires trust, trust requires time, and these days time is our scarcest resource. For many, pondering the amount of time it could take to build a network of trusting relationships tips the balance between the status quo and the desire to change. Investing an unknown quantity of time in networking activities that have no guarantee of bearing fruit seems more painful than keeping things the way they are. It’s at this point on their road to higher influence that people start to chant the mantra of our times, “I don’t have time.” The truth is that in the long run, it actually takes more time to get things done when there is little or no trust, than if the time was initially invested to build substantial levels of trust. Stephen M.R. Covey lays out the economic implications of trust this way, “Trust always affects two outcomes—speed and cost. When trust goes down, speed will also go down and costs will go up. When trust goes up, speed will also go up and costs will go down.”

For example, after 9/11, most sporting arenas and concert venues began checking people’s bags before allowing them to enter the facility. This procedure creates long lines of people standing outside of the venue. The time spent queuing up at the doors is time and money not spent at inside concessions. Additionally, most venues had to take on more security personnel; the expense of which found its way to the ticket prices. Trust went down, speed went down, and cost went up. An article titled “The Implications of the Trust Crisis,” quotes the research findings of Luigi Zingales, Robert C. McCormack Professor of Entrepreneurship and Finance and David G. Booth Faculty Fellow. According to Zingales, an absence of trust “can bring even the richest, most advanced economies to a grinding halt.” He goes on to say, “People depart with their money in exchange for promises that aren’t worth the paper they’re written on if there is no trust.” When we consider the economics, can any of us really afford not to build trusting relationships?

The Core Truth about Influence

In order to fulfill our responsibilities and achieve our objectives, the vast majority of us need the willing cooperation of those both within and outside of our chain of command. At first, it would appear that we have two options: exert our formal authority or use our influence. With our direct reports, exerting our formal authority would seem to be the most expedient way to get people to comply with a request. This method may get the job done in the short-term, but the long-term price of unwilling compliance is high.
Command and control tactics erode trust, demoralize employees, and ultimately undercut productivity. When it comes to winning the cooperation of those outside the scope of our authority, we can't demand, command, reward, cajole, or punish them even if we wanted to. Upon deeper reflection, using our influence to motivate the willing cooperation of others toward the achievement of optimum results is truly our best and possibly only option. Given the significant role influence plays in our ability to be effective leaders, choosing not to improve our levels of influence, is like making a choice not to succeed. Think of influence like Rome. It is not built in a day. But there is a plan to follow, and once it is built, it stands the test of time. The choice is yours. Choose wisely.

About the Author
Nicole De Falco has almost twenty years of experience in performance improvement consulting including training development, sales, marketing, and delivery. She led an instructional design department and was a Vice President on the executive team of an international sales training firm. Currently, as a consultant with McGurer & Associates, Inc., Nicole specializes in leadership and team development. She graduated from Northwestern University with a Bachelor of Science in Speech, and received her MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. Nicole can be reached via email: ndefalco@mcgurer.com

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