A QUESTION of LEADERSHIP

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Influencing begins with a lot of groundwork. The first thing leaders should do in the process of influencing is to establish the need that is prompting them to exert influence in the first place. It may be a need to secure resources, to look after themselves in regard to their career development, to find out where the organization stands on promoting them, or to receive feedback.

Once the need is clear, leaders need to get the lay of the land. They need to determine whom they are trying to influence and assess how they stand with each of those individuals in terms of their relationship. It's kind of like a bank account—assessing your personal account balance with each individual. Do you need to make a deposit, perhaps because it's a new relationship or because of something negative that happened in the relationship in the past? Do you think that the relationship is established, stable, trusting, and mutually satisfying enough that you can make a withdrawal, and if so how large a withdrawal? The assessment process can take a lot of time and effort, but it's part of being a leader, and it becomes easier as leaders continue to put it into practice.

The next step for leaders is to position themselves and plan their entry. This can be done informally—for instance, by asking people a question about the agenda item to find out if they are interested in it or even know about it. Even if they don't know about it, the item has now been put on their radar screens. It's almost like doing a market check—finding out who might or might not be on board with the agenda. Even though this planting of the seeds is still part of the preparatory process, the leader is building the beginnings of a coalition.

> **It's important to make a memorable, lasting impression.**

Once leaders have done their homework and made some inroads, they can start moving their agenda forward. Leaders need to make sure that whatever the content of their agenda is, they believe in it and its relevance to the people they are trying to influence. Without this belief in their message, leaders run the risk of negative political consequences. When the influence message is formalized, it's important to do it in a way that makes a memorable, lasting, striking impression and connection. By doing so leaders improve the chances that those they are trying to influence will take action on the agenda rather than recalling it later with a yawn and saying, "I heard about this thing Bob wants to do, and it's kind of interesting."

Making the message memorable is doubly important because follow-up is always necessary to successfully influence someone. Influencing is never a package that is wrapped up and done with. One way for leaders to follow up is to give "gifts" to those they are trying to influence. These are not gifts in the traditional sense. They also are not bribes, they must be appropriate, and leaders shouldn't give too many of them. These gifts are things totally unrelated to the agenda on which the leader is trying to influence people. They are related to raising the bank accounts and keeping the leader and his or her agenda on people's radar screens. Such a gift can be as simple as helping someone with a problem. For instance, if someone is having trouble using the company's new on-line travel reservation system, the leader could send the person an e-mail with tips on how to navigate through the system.

There are various ways for leaders to carry out the actual act of influencing. They can influence through rational persuasion, using logic and evidence and numbers to make their case. Or they can take an inspirational approach, appealing to people's values, ideals, and aspirations. But whatever influence tactic leaders use, it's crucial that they first assess the situation and the people they are trying to influence, position themselves and plan their entry, and make their message indelible.

How can leaders learn to influence others in their organizations—their bosses, peers, and subordinates?

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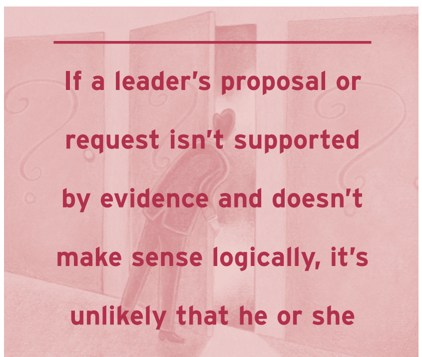
The art of influencing is critical for leaders. The research of Gary Yukl, a professor of management at the State University of New York at Albany and a noted author on influencing, has found that leaders use eleven influencing tactics. Of these, three stand out to me as being particularly effective: rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, and consultation.

In rational persuasion, leaders use logical arguments and factual evidence to show how a proposed or requested action or task is desirable and feasible. Leaders sometimes try to do this by using undocumented assertions. This can work if those whom the leader is trying to influence do not push further for evidential and logical clarity. If they do, the leader needs to do more homework to come up with a detailed explanation of the logical reasons for the proposal or request.

This homework is crucial if the leader is to illustrate why the action or task, if completed successfully, will add value in ways such as building the business, serving customers, furthering strategic objectives, or otherwise helping the organization's bottom line. If a leader's proposal or request isn't supported by evidence and doesn't make sense logically, it's unlikely that he or she will be able to get others in the organization to buy into it.

Through inspirational appeals, leaders arouse the values, ideals, and aspirations of those they are trying to influence to gain their enthusiasm for and commitment to a proposed or requested action or task. Most people have a natural desire to be involved in work that is worthwhile and meaningful—work that makes a difference. For instance, a leader may appeal to people's desire for excellence—their wish to be part of the best team or organization—or to other ideals and aspirations such as progress, loyalty, freedom, self-fulfillment, justice, fairness, equality, humanitarianism, and patriotism. In some organizations this influence tactic may be hampered by a culture that is obsessed with the bottom line and that places little emphasis on connecting the company's product or service to anything meaningful beyond profits. But even in such cynical organizations, leaders will find that people tend to want the work they do to be aligned with their own values, ideals, and aspirations.



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When using the influence tactic of consultation, leaders establish buy-in by inviting others to participate in planning the execution of a proposed or requested action or task. This is often done by allowing them to contribute to the decision-making process and asking them for their specific ideas and input on how they would accomplish the action or task. People who feel that they are an integral part of an undertaking will be more likely to not only accept the undertaking but also do their utmost to achieve it. Once the action or task is underway, their commitment can be reinforced by further consulting them on their problems, concerns, and how they would adjust the original proposal.

To influence people in an organization successfully, leaders must design their message to appeal to the heads and hearts of those they are trying to influence as well as to those individuals' desires for personal and professional growth and for the success of the organization as a whole.