

## Expanding Your Influence

**I**NFLUENCE. Its origins can be traced back 2,500 years. Aristotle devoted his time in ancient Greece to teaching the citizenry how to persuade and convince others on matters ranging from debates of right and wrong to government issues.

Aristotle's rhetoric is still relevant today; influence is a matter of practicing sound logic, nurturing relationships, and developing personal credibility. In today's downsized, reengineered, and cost-conscious organizations, people find themselves managing many relationships—bosses, their boss's boss, peers, employees, customers, team members, and contractors.

At work we all face a variety of situations in which we must influence, persuade, or convince others. How do you—regardless of organizational position—influence others in a positive way to get results and increase your credibility?

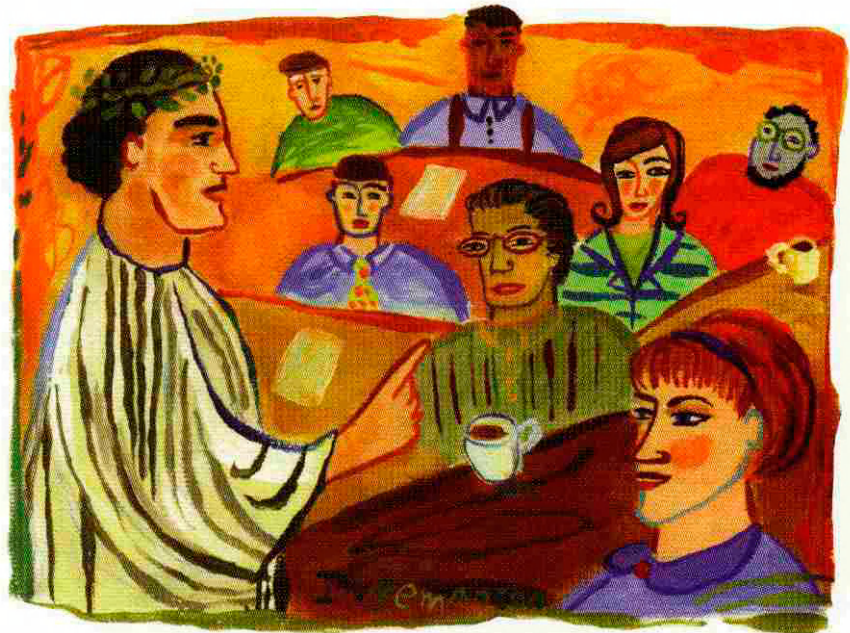
Positive influence is cooperative, not manipulative. When used effectively, all parties' voices are heard and all parties may benefit.

### Strategies for positive influence

Following are seven strategies that have proven to be successful with employees, managers, and executives in a variety of organizations. There is no one strategy that works best. Influencing others is a complex process of discovering what works for the particular person or persons you are attempting to influence.

**1. Determine where the influence lies in your organization.** Take the time to discover who is influential in your organization. Who above, below, or next to you has the ability to influence higher-ups, persuade a group to his or her thinking, and get things accomplished?

There are several ways to learn who are the influential people in your company. Listen to the organizational stories you hear, make a point of going to lunch with others at least twice a week, and attend meetings and seminars. Asking your boss if you can attend key meetings or acting as a "stand-in" when he or she can't attend is another



way to determine where influence lies. During these meetings, be observant and take note of who listens to whom. Take note of the strategies that people use. What works? What doesn't? Is it what they say, how they say it, or both?

The next step is to seek out opportunities to develop relationships with influential people in your organization. Invite them to lunch. Ask them for advice. Model their behavior.

**2. Create a personal advisory board.** I have worked with several managers who have either intentionally or unconsciously developed their own personal advisory board. The idea is to develop relationships with a group of people you trust, who have your best interest at heart, and who can offer advice and suggestions and act as a sounding board. Include individuals throughout your organization, as well as people outside the organization.

Then, before your next presentation to a senior management team, talk through your idea with a colleague from your "board." Get input on your approach or strategy. Ask your colleague to question and challenge your approach, ideas, and assumptions. That strategy will help ensure that your ideas are well-thought-out and tested before they're formally presented.

**3. Practice the "foot-in-the-door" tech-**

**nique.** This is a classic sales technique based on the idea of starting small. By obtaining a small commitment upfront from someone, you increase your chances of gaining a larger commitment in the future.

A human resources director I work with used the foot-in-the-door technique to make a major change in her work schedule. In order to balance her work and family responsibilities, she wanted to work at home two days a week, and three days at the office. She knew the vice president would not agree to this, at least not in the beginning. So, she decided to start small by asking her boss if she could work at home on Thursday mornings. She suggested that staying home would help her focus on a project that required uninterrupted time and attention, and she would dedicate Thursday mornings specifically to that project. Her boss agreed. After several weeks and a successful completion of the project, the HR director requested permission to work at home all day on Thursdays. Again she provided justification for how she would use her time. Her request was approved. Over time, the HR director's ultimate goal was achieved—she is now working two full days from home.

The foot-in-the-door technique

works. However, each success story depends on one critical factor—justification. Individuals who are successful in obtaining their ultimate request are able to justify and explain why the request is warranted.

**4. Seek input ahead of time.** Don't surprise people in meetings and expect them to make important decisions. Get them on board ahead of time by asking for their input or giving them snippets of information to think about before coming into the meeting.

Linda, a director at a large health-care organization, learned firsthand the benefit of seeking input ahead of time. Linda is responsible for prioritizing her company's multimillion dollar projects and presenting this information monthly to the senior management team. The prioritization is controversial because every project should be at the top of the list. In the past, Linda came to each monthly meeting and put up an overhead depicting the priorities. This led to much discussion and debate and very few decisions. Linda left every meeting discouraged and without direction or decisions in order to move forward.

After several months of frustration and little progress, Linda decided to take a different approach. One week before a meeting was scheduled, Linda called each of the project sponsors. She informed them where their project fell in the prioritization and asked if they agreed. If they didn't, she probed for more information and asked them to specifically explain why they saw it differently. That approach gave Linda more information and, at times, required a change in priorities. However, Linda was surprised to find that the majority of the project sponsors agreed with her initial assessment. The result: Linda left each meeting with specific steps to move the project forward and business milestones were achieved.

**5. Practice effective meeting behaviors.** In business, meetings are where ideas are shared, decisions are made, and impressions are formed. Attend all meetings with the mindset of being "on stage." We often think of ourselves on stage when we make presentations to a group. While this is true, you are not "off stage" when you sit in a meeting. People, fairly or

not, will evaluate you on your behaviors and interactions with others in meetings. Positive meeting behaviors include the following:

- ▶ Listen actively.
- ▶ Make eye contact with the speaker and others in the meeting.
- ▶ Take notes when appropriate (avoid taking too many notes—this will limit both your eye contact and involvement).
- ▶ Maintain good posture.
- ▶ Be aware of your physical space. Research suggests that powerful people take up more physical space. Observe this behavior at the next meeting you attend. Confident and competent people are not hesitant to take up space by leaning forward, putting their hands on the table, and spreading their paperwork out on the table.
- ▶ Offer your opinion and ideas. Don't wait to be asked.
- ▶ Ask good questions.
- ▶ If meeting with an assertive and talkative group, practice the art of interruption. Use your nonverbals (for example, leaning forward) combined with a "verbal starter." A verbal starter is a quick, short phrase which allows you to get into the conversation even when the speaker never pauses or takes a breath. Examples of verbal starters include: "My perspective on that is..." "I'd like to add to John's point..." "Another perspective is..." "I agree, and I'd like to add..."

By demonstrating your confidence and competence in meetings, others will look to you for advice and input. These positive behaviors will carry over into other interaction and have the potential to increase your span of influence in the organization.

**6. Understand what you can change and what you can't.** Stephen Covey popularized the idea of Circles of Influence, a concept that says while we can change or influence certain things, there are several things we cannot change. The innermost circle, the circle of control, includes those things that we can change—our attitudes, our goals, our dreams. The middle circle, the circle of influence, includes those things we can affect or influence through our communication, decisions, and behavior. While we can't change a boss, a colleague, or even a spouse, we can affect them with our

actions and communication. The outermost circle, the circle of concern, includes those things that may affect us, but we can do very little, if anything, to change. When working with one federal agency, I found that Congress and President Clinton were cited often as examples of what fell into the federal employees' circle of concern.

As people who choose to work for a particular organization, there are certain organizational realities we cannot change—those things in our circle of concern. Successful people have the ability and willingness to say "I realize I cannot change this." Therefore, "I am going to focus my energy on those things I can change or influence." Spend your time and energy on your circles of control and influence and you'll be surprised at how much you can accomplish.

**7. Become resilient.** One of the most difficult positive influence strategies is resiliency. Resiliency refers to the bounce-back ability we have when we try something more than once, or even twice. Resilient people are those who don't give up if something doesn't work the first time. For example, if you ask your colleagues for their support on a key project before the meeting and they agree, and then once in the meeting your colleagues waiver and say they need more information, don't give up! Instead, ask yourself, what could have happened or changed between the time they gave their support and when the meeting occurred? Or, what didn't I do at the meeting to get the decision I wanted? Resilient individuals are able to take such incidences and turn them into learning experiences. Document your learning, bounce back, and try a new strategy!

Positive influence is a skill that can be learned, no matter what organizational position you hold. To influence others in a positive way takes time, energy, confidence, and resiliency. After 2,500 years, individuals are still learning about the complexity of influencing others. Experiment with these strategies and watch your span of influence increase.

---

**Jennifer Dreyer** is vice president of Tamayo Consulting, 5315 Avenida Encinas, Suite 250, Carlsbad, CA 92008. Phone 619/930-9172.