

The Art of Influencing



**Example is not
the main thing in
influencing others.
It is the only thing.**

Albert Schweitzer



We all love a rags-to-riches story. For someone, without the benefits of wealth, fame or power to rise up in society requires something special – an ability to get people on side and have them give you a chance. Something which fascinates and inspires – and that something is influence.

Our sphere of direct control in life is often very small. Even as a leader, there are usually only a handful of people who we might have organisational ‘authority’ to direct. And this sort of control is tenuous at best – likely to ensure compliance with the word of a direction but not the spirit.

That’s why if we want to truly get anything done – we need to be able to influence. Upwards, downwards, horizontally and through an entire system, influencing is often considered to be synonymous with leadership, given its central importance for driving positive change. So, what is this magical quality?

What is Influencing?

Influence is typically defined as “the power to have an effect on people or things”. When we think of influencing in social and organisational contexts though, we are most interested in an effect that encourages or elicits behaviours which align with our goals.

In this way, influencing can be both direct and indirect. We often talk about being influenced by our role models – this is an indirect way of influencing. Simply through our exposure to a person’s way of acting and thinking, we change our patterns of behaviour.

While influencing through modelling is also a key part of leadership, this Primer is more focused on direct influencing – where we take specific actions to change or encourage certain behaviours or thoughts in others. Another term for this often used is persuasion.

Unpacking Influencing

Influencing and persuasion have been studied extensively by social psychologists. It is a phenomenon that forms part of life. We all know someone who seems to always get everything they want. People will go out of their way to help them and for nothing in return. But this isn't an immutable characteristic we are just born with, influencing is an art and a practice – and one central to leadership.

The Influencing Conditions

One of the classic theories of influencing is Robert B. Cialdini's 6 principles of influence from his text [Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion](#). Cialdini identified six fundamental principles of influence that can be applied in the workplace:

- The Principle of **Liking**:
People like those who like them.
- The Principle of **Reciprocity**:
People repay in kind.
- The Principle of **Social Proof**:
People follow the lead of those who are similar.
- The Principle of **Consistency**:
People align with their clear commitments.
- The Principle of **Authority**:
People defer to experts.
- The Principle of **Scarcity**:
People want more of what they have less of

We might think of these as “influencing conditions.” They identify the circumstances where influencing occurs successfully. What's interesting to note is that while authority is a principle of influence, it is only one amongst many. Influencing may require us to leverage one or multiple of the other principles to bring about our desired course of action.

Influencing Approaches or 'Tactics'

Obviously, some of Cialdini's principles may be out of our control in any particular circumstance. What is in our control though, is our approach to influencing the situation. The most renowned research on influencing approaches or 'tactics' was that conducted by Gary Yukl and Bruce Tracey in the 1980s.

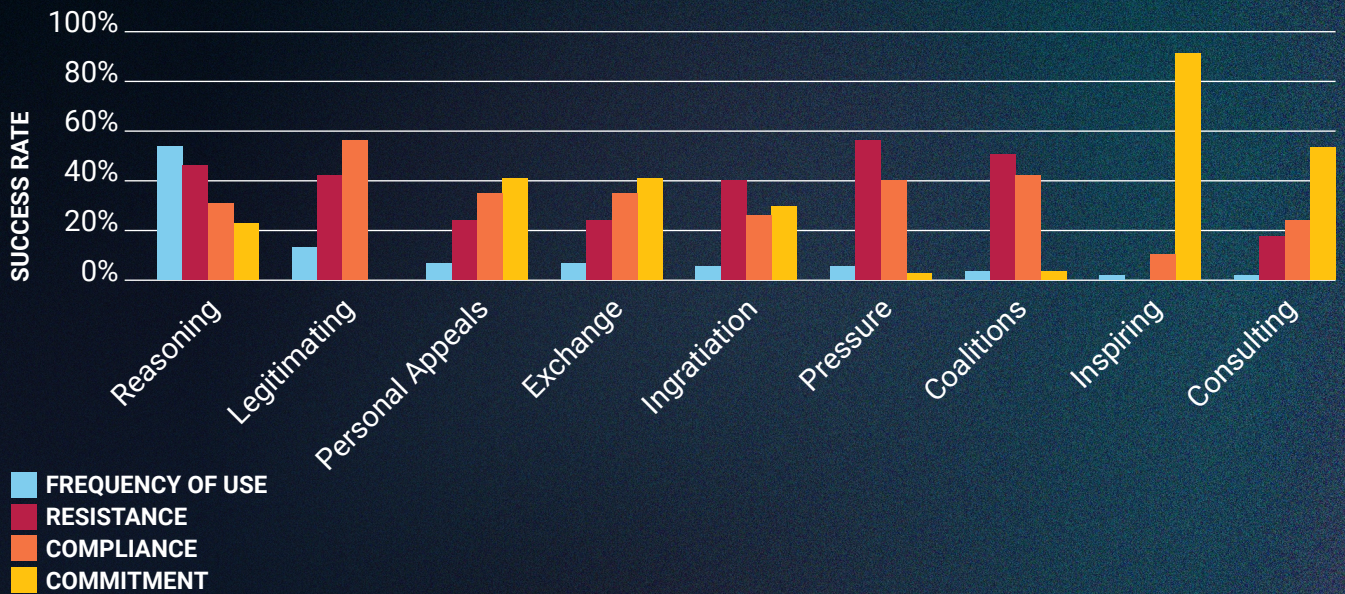
Yukl and Tracey [studied the effectiveness of a manager's use of different influencing tactics](#) in terms of building task commitment in their team and overall effectiveness. What they found was that 'hard' tactics of influence such as pressure, appeals to a majority view ('coalition') and appeals to authority or rules ('legitimizing') were the least effective means of changing behaviours. This is because they did not change the person's views, just their immediate actions.

The most effective means of influencing was **inspirational** appeals, followed by a number of other 'soft' tactics:

- Reasoning
- Socializing
- Exchange
- Personal appeal
- Consultation

Effectiveness of Influence Tactics

The Power of Influence (Fundamentals of Leadership) Gary Yukl & Bruce Tracey (1995) - Consequences of Influence Tactics



Purposeful Leadership and New Power

It makes sense given these findings that the major focus in leadership these days is on purpose. Inspiration around a greater good or goal is the way to get the most out of people and bring about alignment in action. They have to really believe in what they are doing. As a leader, being able to articulate and drive an inspiring vision or purpose is your greatest tool for influencing.

“
**Leadership
 is influence.**”

John C. Maxwell

How Do We Apply it

For Leaders?

Drawing from these theories then, influencing requires us to move through a number of steps if we want to maximise our prospects of success. These are:

1. Figure out your **core purpose** – Why are you seeking to influence this action? What is the underlying purpose and can you articulate that? Not only is this a good practice as a leader more generally, but it will allow you to influence much more effectively by speaking effectively to your motivations.
2. **Empathise** with your partner – Think deeply about the person or people you are trying to influence. What is likely to appeal to them? What influencing conditions are at play? How would they likely respond to the different influencing tactics?
3. Be **confident, mindful and engaged** in the moment – Social psychology research has identified a number of factors that are typical of strong influencers. These include speaking loudly and confidently. They also show that:
 - Successful persuaders are better at considering other people's mental states.
 - Successful persuaders show increased activity in the brain's mentalising system.
 - Successful persuaders are socially flexible, able to change strategies depending on context.

Try to stay present and listen to what the other person has to say, to understand where they are coming from better. Models like the advocacy-inquiry matrix and the four parts of speech are a good way to think about getting a balance between listening and speaking.

Key Takeaways

If there is one leadership skill that we know will have universal application in our professional lives, it's influencing. Spending time to better understand this part of human life will pay off immensely in your capacity to impact whatever system you are a part of.

“
The key to
successful
leadership
is influence,
not
authority.”

Ken Blanchard

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