

Understanding the True Realities of Influencing. **What do you need to do in order to be Influential?**

Background and why Influencing is increasingly important?

At Oakwood Learning we have carried out our own extensive research on Influencing since 1995. This research is ongoing but the results to date are outlined in this paper. Our perception is that influencing skills are increasingly in demand and of ever greater importance, particularly among those with leadership or management responsibilities. There are many reasons for this including:

1. Organisational changes

The days of management based on command and control have all but gone. There is a demand for more involvement and participation in decisions by those closest to the work. Moreover, organisations are frequently moving away from vertical silo management, and getting managers to work across boundaries, in project teams and in matrix structures, where managers are required to get results without having direct authority.

2. Organisations increasingly valuing and assessing people by their interpersonal skills

Another trend which suggests influencing skills are of increasing importance is the growing frequency with which interpersonal skills are being assessed and valued by organisations. Job advertisements, for example, are tending more and more to demand high levels of influencing and negotiating skills for managerial positions. Internal promotion panels are going the same way, and modern appraisal systems seem increasingly weighted towards these skills.

Therefore to be a successful person in an organisation, having excellent influencing skills is an essential attribute not just a desirable one. The information that follows shows you how the most powerful influencers weave their magic in organisations.

The context of Influence

There are a number of strategic aspects in regard to influencing as outlined by J Conga (*1). He says in order for persuasion to happen four conditions have to be in place. Firstly you have to have established credibility by either expertise or relationship. Secondly, both people need to see the goals and the shared advantage. Thirdly the position has to be vividly reinforced with compelling data, examples which have an impact both logically and emotionally. Fourth, there has to be a connection in the relationship not just the facts.

There are also a number of contextual issues around the relationship that also impact on influence as outlined by Robert Cialdini (*2). He outlines a number of items in relation to persuasion. People are more likely to be influenced by people who they like, and who like them. We all know this instinctively. Who would you rather go the extra mile for - someone you like or someone you don't?

People repay in kind, therefore give what you want to receive. The old saying ‘treat others as you would like them to treat you’ is very true in terms of influence. We are social animals and people are influenced by the lead of others, especially in groups. Peer power is a great way to influence. Get the critical mass of a group persuaded and the whole group is likely to follow. If people commit to an idea, they are likely to follow through positively, especially if the commitment comes from the individual’s value set.

People value expertise if they can see how it will help them in their goals. We all have some form of expertise. Finally, people value scarcity; exclusive information for example is more likely to influence than non-exclusive.

Our research – the 11 principles of Influencing

In our research, organisational managers, leaders and employees were asked this question:

‘From your experiences, how do people influence you?’

They were asked to focus on behaviours that they had observed in people they found positively influential. Over a 10 year period the answers from over 1200 people were collated to discover the trends. The people asked were all from medium to large scale organisations and were from a mix of managerial, professional and technical disciplines.

The results from our research are complementary to the contextual and strategic findings above. They take the more contextual issues and add a layer of behavioural skills.

There are 24 behavioural categories from our research, categorised into **11 principles of influencing**. We have summarised them and presented them in order of how often they were mentioned by people in the research.

1. The principle of ATTENDING to others (Total 20% of answers)

By far the single biggest influential behaviour, is the skill of ATTENDING to others (19% of all comments referred to this). People who practice this have the ability to genuinely pay attention to the other person and demonstrate that they are listening. It involves being able to focus on their ideas, needs, feelings and thoughts, and PUTTING OTHERS at the CENTRE of YOUR FOCUS. On the receiving end of this, people feel like you are paying FULL ATTENTION to them, not distracted by anything else, not just paying lip service to listening, not waiting for the chance to put your own agenda in focus again. ACTIVE LISTENING, QUESTIONING and summarising are part (but not all) of using the behaviours of attending.

This leads to the influencer being seen as approachable, empathetic, OPEN to INFLUENCE, encouraging, and friendly. Many of our respondents attributed the virtues of strength and confidence to someone who has the ability to ask and listen rather than just tell.

The research suggests therefore that if you only pick one thing to work on in your influencing, it should be this – really ensuring you give the other person your full attention and listening actively.

2. The principle of *SUPPORT & TRUST* (total 18% of answers)

Over 14.5% of all comments referred to being SUPPORTED by the influential person. This support took many forms. On the one hand it takes the form, as you would expect, of giving help and advice. However, a number of other elements were attributed to this skill such as DEMONSTRATING BELIEF in someone, CARING about the progress they are making, PLACING CONFIDENCE in the other person, and ENCOURAGING them. On the receiving end of this skill the influencer was viewed as friendly, empowering, and constructive. PRAISE was seen as a positive form of recognition which as we know, is a basic human need. The fact that good influencers were APPRECIATIVE of the efforts of others and GENUINELY offered thanks and praise to that person was mentioned a number of times. This support took the form of face to face support, but interestingly, respondents stated that they knew they would be supported even if they were not in attendance at the time.

Another 2.5% of all answers also specifically mentioned TRUST as a key influential behaviour. This takes the form of trusting others judgement, experience and views. People feel trusted if they are given important work to do, and given the freedom to own and carry out the work (backed up by support when needed). On the receiving end of SUPPORT and TRUST people will go the extra mile for you.

3. The principle of *IMPACT & PRESENCE* (total 13% of all answers)

The levels of ENERGY in influencers seemed to be figural in their impact as a presenter (7% of all comments referred to this). However, there were two broadly different views on the type of energy. Some found an influencer who was energetic, dynamic and passionate, to be influential. Others found an influencer who was calm, relaxed, thoughtful, and reflective to be impactful. Interestingly, there were no comments at all about levels of energy in-between these two polarities.

PHYSICAL IMPACT seemed to be important within the research experience. Over 6% of comments related to how influencers used their non-verbal behaviour. Eye contact was the most frequently mentioned aspect of this, followed closely by a number of comments relating to the use of open and positive body language. We know from previous research that non verbal aspects play a large part in the overall impact of an influencer. It seems however that CONGRUANCE between what is said, how it is said and the physical non-verbal behaviour is a key to effective influencing.

4. The principle of *CLARITY* (10% of all answers)

Effective influencers need to be able to portray their wants and ideas with conviction. (5% of comments in the research referred to this). Good influencers are able to be ASSERTIVE with their wants. They also have crystal CLARITY when outlining these. They are able to make the receiver understand the CONSEQUENCES of what they are suggesting. However, they are never aggressive (which the research suggests can kill the long term influence immediately). As a result of being clear, they are attributed with being decisive, determined, committed, and resilient. People will follow them as they are clear about the way forward. Influencers are FOCUSSED on achievement (1% of answers mentioned this), and are PERSISTANT in achieving their wants.

Influencers who were good at this were described as CHALLENGING (2% of answers mentioned this), both of themselves and others. They felt stretched by these people in a positive way. This would be done either directly using DIRECT FEEDBACK (mentioned in 2% of all answers) or by the use of SKILLED PROBING QUESTIONS.

5. The principle of LOGICAL PRESENTATION. (Total of 9% of answers)

We noticed prior to our research that being logical was many people's 'default' position when it came to influencing. We therefore wondered how this would emerge from the results. It did come out as important (although far less important than the skills mentioned above). People felt influenced by information that was presented in an ORGANISED and logical/rational way (6% of responses mentioned this). When information was well prepared and included reasoning leading to conclusions, people were often persuaded, particularly if all the facts had been taken into consideration. They saw the influencer as professional and as a voice of reason.

2% of all answers referred to the amount of KNOWLEDGE held by the influencer as important. If they had expertise and used their knowledge well, they will influence others. Overall they were seen as ARTICULATE COMMUNICATORS, and eloquent in talking to others (1% of answers mentioned this).

6. The principle of TRANSPARENCY (total 8% of all answers)

One of the most frequently mentioned skills and attributes of effective influencers in our research was that of TRANSPARENCY (over 8% of all answers referred to this). A number of aspects are key to being an effective influencer. Good influencers are open with knowledge, their reasons for decisions and their thinking, (in fact they often seem to 'think out loud'!). They are seen as honest by others due to this. BEING OPEN seems to be a key skill in sharing experiences, knowledge, and information. Influencers who are transparent in their dealings engender trust. They are seen as transcending the petty political struggles of the everyday workplace. So, Knowledge is power – but only if you share it freely with others!

7. The principle of being RELATIONAL (6% of all answers)

Where do effective influencers focus their efforts and attention when they are influencing others? The evidence suggests that rather than focus on the content of the work or the task, it is the type of relationship they set up. 4% of responses said that they were influenced by people who are PERSONABLE. These influencers allow for HUMOUR in the relationship. They have a PEOPLE ORIENTATION. They are POLITE. These influencers focus on finding COMMONALITY that is drawing attention to areas of agreement between themselves and others.

They are seen as being APPROACHABLE and easy to talk to. A number of people also mentioned that the powerful influencers manage to be NON-JUDGEMENTAL in the relationship. They did not feel assessed or judged as a person by the influencer.

8. The principle of FUTURE FOCUS (5% of all answers)

Good Influencers are able to explain and give direction in terms of a VISION of the future. These may be short or long term visions, but they have CLARITY, and are able to articulate this in a way which engages others. They are able to have a 'helicopter' view and describe how the work being done leads to their future goals. They are good at

BRIDGING the practicalities of the principle of logical presentation with a broader future direction. They are able to outline what success will look like, and REASONS WHY they are going in this direction.

Respondents also named the ability of the influencer to portray the future direction using STORY, METAPHOR & ANALOGY which resulted in a greater understanding of the desired goal.

9. *The principle of CONFIDENCE (4% of all answers)*

People who display CONFIDENCE have the ability to persuade others along with them without always having lots of rational arguments. There is something about their presence which attracts others to follow. 4% of the research answers mentioned confidence in two aspects. Firstly, CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES. This largely seems to be a combination of non-verbal behaviour, presentation of information and presence/energy. However they have the ability to do this without being seen as arrogant. Secondly, they show confidence in others. Good influencers display CONFIDENCE IN OTHERS' abilities. They work to a premise of 'I'm OK – You're OK'. As a result of these behaviours they are often seen as strong and committed with a lot of self belief.

10. *The principle of MODELLING (4% of all answers)*

It seems that many of us look to our influence role models to display the behaviours that they are asking of us or that we admire. People reported their good influencers as LEADING BY EXAMPLE and DEMONSTRATING key behaviours. The behaviours they were demonstrating were many and varied, from commitment to following up on promises through to being self motivated. The result being that people felt inspired by such influencers to go the extra mile for them and carry out their requests.

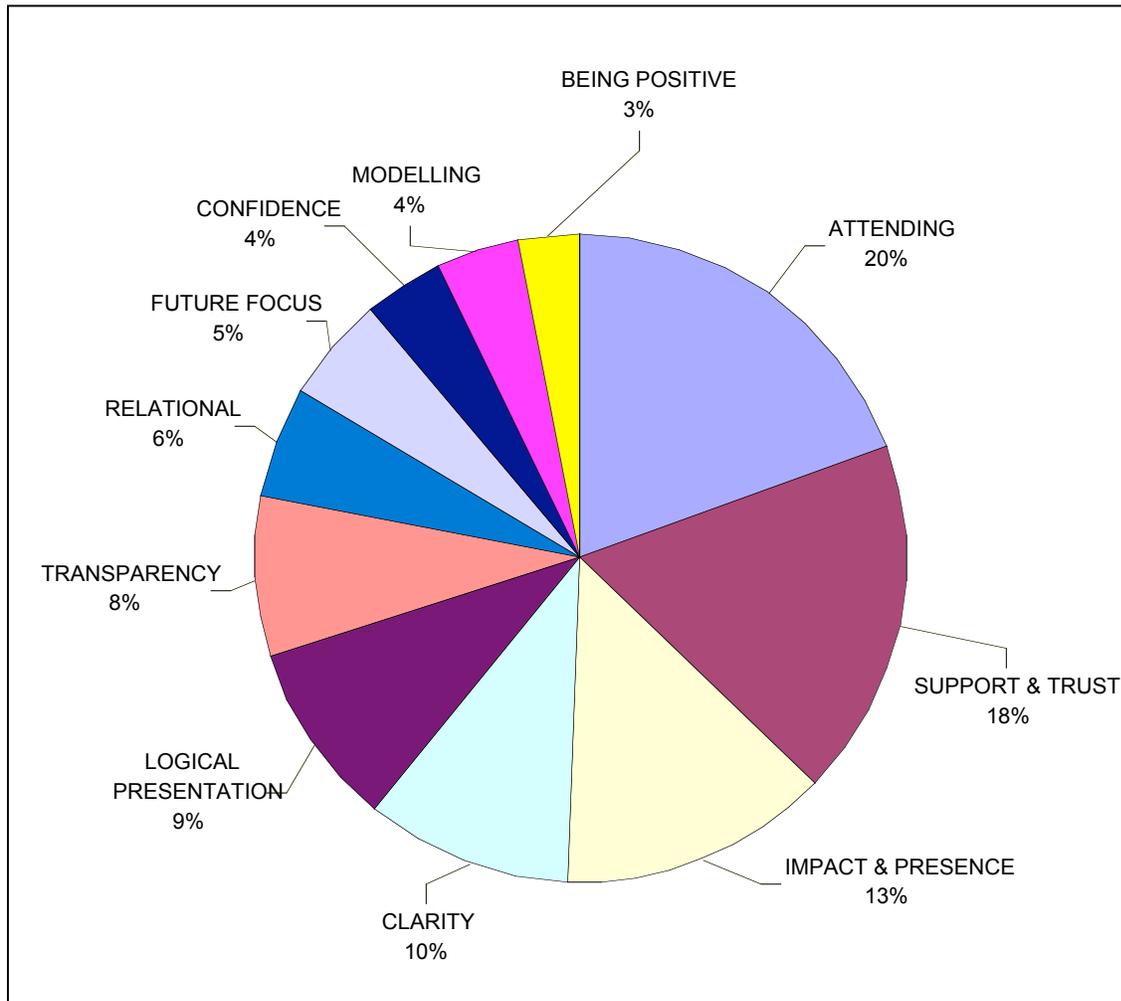
11. *The principle of being POSITIVE (3% of all answers)*

Powerful influencers have a positive outlook. They are OPTIMISTS and see good reasons why something will work and be beneficial. If things do not go to plan, they are likely to pick up on an unforeseen benefit. They are seen as being ENTHUSIASTIC and OPTIMISTIC by others, and are described as 'FOCUSSED ON THE SOLUTION not the problems'. Much research has been carried out about the benefits of being positive about self, others and situations, now they can add 'effective influencer' to that list of benefits!

Other influence skills

A number of other aspects about powerful influencers were mentioned in our research. One particular paradox mentioned was that many people (2% of all answers) found CONSISTANCY an important aspect of influence. People felt that they knew what to expect from these influencers in terms of behaviour. However, another 2% named ADAPTABILITY to be a key aspect for them.

The 11 Principles of Influencing



The results had many predictable elements to them from our own experience of influential people in organisations. However, of particular surprise were the amount of comments related to certain behaviours and elements of influence.

It became clear through the research that there are no 'magic formulas' for influencing. Situation, relationship and context are of paramount importance. It also became clear that there is not one 'right' way of influencing. The evidence suggests that two people may be equally influential and effective using very different behaviours.

The research also clearly indicated that one of these skills alone does not make a person influential. Exceptional influencers utilise a number of different skills with ease as well as moving freely from one skill to another.

Our research outlines clearly the ‘what’ of influencing based on real life practical observations from people within organisations. The next stage for anyone reading this has to be ‘How can I develop these skills to become a powerful influencer’?

If you would like to learn how, please contact us.

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*1 The Necessary Art of Persuasion’ by Jay Conga in Harvard Business Review May 1998 product no 4258

*2 ‘Harnessing the science of Persuasion’ by Robert Cialdini in Harvard Business Review Oct 2001.
Product no 9715