



Seize the Power of Influence

By Jeff Zakaryan

The main dining room of a posh restaurant was jammed with business people and the din of lunch time conversation when one voice was distinctly heard among all the others: “My broker is E.F. Hutton” the person whispered...and the entire room fell completely silent. That famous television commercial from many years ago ended with this powerful slogan: “When E.F. Hutton talks...people listen.”

People who are consistently listened to are people of influence. Influence is defined as the ability to affect the course of events or another person’s actions, behaviors or way of thinking. Today’s business world has created an ever shrinking intersection between functions and expects competing viewpoints, priorities and hierarchies to give way to getting things done right and fast. As things become more networked and co-workers more dispersed, the need for effective cross-functional cooperation and collaboration has never been greater.

The key to making it work? Those rare people that efficiently facilitate the process because they are trusted and respected by everyone involved, whether they work for them or not. In “Exerting Influence without Authority,” a Harvard Business Review interview with Claremont Business School Professor Jay Conger, he characterizes the skill set as “lateral leadership,” which he says comprises capabilities from networking and coalition building to persuading and negotiating. That initiative you’re championing will stand a far better chance of happening quickly, Conger notes, if you devote the time to honing these critical influence skills. “You’ll gain access to the resources you need and see doors swing open freely to key players whose cooperation you need most.”

How do you become an influential lateral leader?

HERE ARE THREE IDEAS TO CONSIDER:

1. BUILD CREDIBILITY

First and foremost know your stuff. Consistently produce outstanding results and continuously develop your professional expertise. Earn a reputation as someone who balances the expedient with big picture, long-term considerations. Be a willing resource to others whenever they can use your help.

2. MAINTAIN INTEGRITY

Deal with people honestly. Gaining trust comes only after people have extensive experience with you being true to your word without fail. Back room deals or even one “perceived” instance of shading the truth will transform you from influential colleague to untrustworthy manipulator.

3. DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY

To influence successfully, learn and understand the needs, priorities and interests of your colleagues. The more you create win-win outcomes the stronger your influence becomes, especially in the toughest, most time-pressured situations. Getting your way should never be the goal. Doing the best thing for the organization should.

The next time you are at a business lunch in a crowded restaurant, imagine how great it will feel if the dining room becomes dead quiet the first moment you speak. Seize the power of influence and people will really listen every time you have something important to say.

Jeff Zakaryan works with CEOs to optimize their effectiveness as leaders.