

What We've Got Here Is a Failure to Influence

Dealing with Life 101

Shallow men believe in luck.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Do any of these situations sound familiar to you?

- It's five o'clock. You've been at your desk since six this morning, and you're nowhere near ready to go home. You have a meeting with your manager tomorrow morning, and you're supposed to have a report finished. You would have, too, if the other people involved had done their parts. First, the data was late from your counterpart in the other group. The people on your team had other priorities and couldn't help you with the analysis. Then the "admin" was too busy to help you prepare a decent-looking presentation. You might have asked your manager for an extension, but you didn't want to look unprepared, so you decided to do it all yourself. It looks like an all-nighter.
- Your teenage daughter, a bright and successful student, has announced that she will be turning down a scholarship to a prestigious university in favor

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of taking a year off to travel and “find herself.” You’ve had several heated arguments about this. Recently, you told her that you couldn’t guarantee that you would pay her college tuition when she returned. Her response was that she was perfectly capable of earning her own money and attending a less expensive school. You feel that you’ve painted yourself into a corner and haven’t made any progress in convincing her of the importance to her future of making the right college choice. You’re also concerned about her safety as a solo traveler in certain parts of the world.

- You are a senior executive charged with the responsibility for implementing the final steps in merging two companies. Executives of the other firm, who see this as an acquisition by your company rather than a merger, are dragging their feet in regard to getting their systems aligned with yours. They give you excuses that sound rational, but the net effect is to delay the implementation. You’re under a lot of pressure to get this completed. The new, merged systems should have been up and running by now, and you’re feeling very frustrated and angry.
- You volunteered to help plan and host the yearly fund-raiser for your child’s preschool. You were reluctant to take this on for fear that you might end up, as has happened before, doing it all yourself. The first few meetings of your committee were very positive; several people volunteered to take responsibility for specific tasks. Now it’s two weeks before the event and several important things haven’t happened. Everyone has an excuse for not delivering on his or her commitments. You feel that the staff and board are depending on you, and you don’t want to let them down. This experience has convinced you, however, that you’re not cut out for community leadership. You feel burned out and disappointed.
- You’ve been nurturing an idea for a couple of years now. It would be an application of your current technology that you believe would have a tremendous impact on the market. It would require a moderate commitment of resources, but the payoff could be spectacular. The problem is that such a project is outside of your current area of responsibility and, in fact, might be seen as competitive with another team’s current project. Your manager has already told you that you would have to have it approved and funded elsewhere. You’re beginning to suspect that it’s a political “hot potato.” You’re still hoping that someone will recognize the potential and support it, but feel discouraged.
- You were recently offered an exciting new position with your company. It would involve spending three years abroad and would probably lead to a significant role for you in the company’s future. When you told your spouse about it, you expected enthusiastic support. Instead, you received a flat and resistant response. This surprised you, as you have always agreed

that whichever one of you was offered the best opportunity would have the other's support, regardless of any inconvenience and disruption that might occur.

- You lead an important project for your company. The project is not going as well as you had hoped. There's a lot of conflict, and milestones are not being achieved. You were selected for this role because of your technical skills, but you're feeling dragged down by the day-to-day hassle of dealing with people's egos and working out the turf issues that seem to get in the way of every cross-functional team you have worked with.
- You chair a standards task force for your association that could have a major impact on the conduct of your profession. Some members of the group are very resistant to the idea of mandatory compliance with the standards. You and several others believe that it's an exercise in futility to develop and present standards and then let people choose whether to adopt them or not. The differences have divided the group, which has now reached an impasse. If you can't come to an agreement, the entire exercise will be seen as a waste of time. You're concerned that you might lose the respect of your colleagues, both within the task force and outside of it, as they've been counting on you to resolve this issue.

The Value of Influence Skills

If you have ever experienced anything like the situations above, you know that all of your technical competence and skills won't resolve the human issues involved in getting business or personal results that are important to you and others. In the real world, a good idea doesn't necessarily sell itself. People don't always share the same values, priorities, and vested interests, even though they work for the same company, share a profession, or live in the same community or household. If you want to be successful as a leader, manager, colleague, friend, spouse, parent, or partner, you must be able to achieve results through the effort and support of others. This requires a good set of influence skills. You already know a lot about influence—we all use it and are affected by the way others use it. By reading this book, practicing, and reflecting, you will bring the process of influence to your conscious attention and learn to manage it with greater focus, precision, ease, and effectiveness.

As a business or technical leader, you are charged with the responsibility for getting results through others—frequently those over whom you don't exercise direct control. Although this is a common expectation, you may not have received any training or preparation for the tough issues and challenges that come with this territory.

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As a member of a team, family, club, or other small group, you know that these groups seldom operate on the basis of hierarchical power or seniority (though you might sometimes wish they would, especially if you are a parent, a committee chair, or a team leader). You may not have many role models for influencing effectively in this kind of environment.

Skillful influencing is more than just effective communication. It's possible to communicate often and clearly without achieving your desired results. Influence skills can be learned, but success as an influencer also requires you to have the ability to read the person and the situation—and the discipline to hold a clear goal in mind while selecting and using the behaviors that are likely to lead you toward that goal. There are many opportunities in daily life to exercise your influence.

A good set of influence skills can lead to

- Improved ability to manage and lead cross-functionally
- More positive and productive personal and professional relationships
- Greater ability to choose and use behaviors tactically to achieve strategic objectives
- More confidence in your ability to achieve results through other people and a better track record of actually doing so
- Increased flexibility in dealing with people from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds, as well as those who differ from you in gender, generation, experience, and personality
- Improved skills for resolving conflict

Influence involves sophisticated understandings and a complex set of skills. Some situations are fairly straightforward and require little in the way of planning; others are Byzantine in their complexity. We don't always get to choose which influence opportunities we'll be confronted with. In this book, we'll explore some practical ideas and tools for exercising influence in all aspects of your life. We'll examine recent research about how people respond to influence and how they make decisions. I've tried to cover, at least briefly, the major areas that are useful for the influencer to explore. Not all of them will be relevant to or needed for every influence situation. I hope you'll find enough here to stimulate your interest in influence and increase your confidence as an influencer. The best way to learn it, of course, is to do it.