CHAPTER 1

Get What You Want by Doing What Your Organization Needs

The One Change You Need to Make

"Sometimes doing your best is not good enough. Sometimes you must do what is required."

—Winston S. Churchill

You know the feeling when you are on a roll at work. You get good reviews, and you are recognized and rewarded by your manager. You look forward to going to work, and feel challenged, stimulated, and "on your front foot." You are doing things you like and doing them well. You are proud of your work.

What makes this so special? It's a great feeling when people at work are interested in you, and appreciate what you do. That is, in a nutshell, influence. Influence means that other people take the time to listen to you, consider what you have to say, and want to work with you. Having impact is all about having a substantive effect on the organization, by leading without formal authority. Your colleagues know you are adding value to the organization, and to them. Influence and impact are the keys to job engagement and job satisfaction. Whether you are a technician using specialized skills or a business leader driving strategy and inspiring and enabling the organization, having influence and impact turns an average job into a personal growth experience.

Most of us have found ourselves in the converse situation at some point. Work is going “OK,” but you find yourself in your job for longer than you planned. You feel like others are not listening to your ideas or paying attention to your input. Maybe you worked your tail off to help your boss turn things around, only to get a mediocre review and bonus. Or, you finally got the promotion you were looking for, only to see yourself struggling to achieve expectations, and hearing feedback that, “Things are going a little slower than we expected.” You feel that you have lost your edge.

When it’s missing, you know it. Human beings are fundamentally social beings. We love interpersonal feedback and connections that establish and reinforce who we are.[i] We spend as much time working as we do on anything else in our lives. Most of us want to find value and purpose in what we do. We need to feel we have agency, and we need to feel connected to others.[ii]

Writers and theorists have different labels for these needs, but they always include notions about independence, connectedness, security, recognition, impact, and having a clear sense of self. When you aren’t getting this from your manager or your organization, to the degree you want or need them, you feel the gap and it creates disappointment. And, to paraphrase Yoda from Star Wars, disappointment leads to frustration, frustration leads to anger, anger leads eventually to getting another job. Bill learned a lesson at an early age in how to find value and meaning in doing what your company needs.

> *At age 15, I took a job as a sales associate in a camera store in downtown Washington, D.C. The store was right on Pennsylvania Avenue, between the White House and the Capital. My objective that summer was to earn enough money to use the discount the owner offered to buy a used Nikon F-1. My dream was to become a professional photographer, and the F-1 was the premier 35mm professional camera. What I did not realize was that very few people who came to the store wanted to talk about fancy cameras or lenses. Most of the people were tourists, walking from one monument to another, and came in either because they needed film, or they could not figure out how to work some basic part of their camera.*
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> *After about the 125th person came in and asked me how to rewind the film, or which button to push for zoom, my frustration began to boil over: “If you bothered to read the manual, you would know that the zoom button is right here,” I said, clearly disgusted. The owner saw this and took me aside. “Bill, you came here to sell cameras, but that is not why you are here. You are here to sell film and film developing, because that is what keeps the store running. I need you to talk nice to the customers, answer their questions, no matter*

how simple, and provide good customer support. If you do that, more people will buy film or get their pictures developed here. That's how we make money. If you treat them poorly, they will go somewhere else. Your job is to get them to come back for those purchases. So, go, be nice, and solve their very simple problems for them."

At first, I was demoralized. I was going to spend the sweltering D.C. summer being bored. Ironically, I was already frustrated and disappointed because, at age 15, I was not aware of the underlying value of my job. My real job was to make customers feel taken care of. After this lecture from my boss, people's simplistic questions stopped being annoying, because I understood what my boss and the customers needed from me the most, and adapted to that.

What Gets in the Way?

So, what is the disconnect between you and what your organization needs from you most? What causes you to feel stuck, or stalled, that you aren't having the impact you want? How can you bring more value to your company and meaning for yourself? In many situations, you are making one or two simple but consequential mistakes: You are not focused on the mission-critical parts of your responsibilities, or you are not doing them in the way that the organization can understand and embrace.

"Wait, what?" you think. "I have objectives. I review these with my manager. How could I be doing the wrong things?" You may be doing the right things at one level, but when you dig a little deeper, you may find you are off the mark—though your boss might also be unaware, because they are focused on doing what they have always done rather than adapting to the current reality of what the organization needs. Or, you may be communicating or interacting in the way that the organizational culture cannot understand or appreciate.[iii]

What we have found, again and again, is that people tend to underperform because they do what is comfortable, what is familiar, or what they desire, rather than what is most important to the organization. The majority of people we have coached believed they were doing the right things, but they did not understand the organization's top priorities. A smaller proportion knew that they weren't doing the right work but were unable to change their mindset so that they could do the work right.

Regardless of whether their choices were conscious or unconscious, they all found themselves stalled, frustrated, and under-recognized and underappreciated by their manager or their company. Is any of this true for you?

Doing What Is Easier

One of the most common causes of losing influence and impact is when you find yourself doing your direct reports' jobs instead of your own. You feel pressured and stressed and find it more comfortable to do work yourself than to give it to someone who works for you. There are a number of reasons, all of them valid to some degree:

> *"It's faster for me to do it."*
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> *"I don't want to overburden my people. I'll take it on."*
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> *"They aren't skilled, and I don't have the time to teach or coach them."*
>
> *"It has to be done just right, and I don't have people who can do it as well as I can."*

Each one of these feels right and may be true in the short run. But at some point, your people start to feel that they aren't growing, and feel their value is eroding just as yours is.

> *Tommy was known for having a blend of technological, operational, and business expertise that helped him rise to become the leader of a 1500-person business unit spanning four continents. He knew the economics of his business and was able convert his skills into practical technology and process solutions. But like many people, his strengths were also his weaknesses. Because Tommy understood the business in such depth, he often knew the answers well before his team did. As a result, he would identify the solution, inform others, and tell them to execute. He spent a lot of time evaluating their work, making adjustments, and providing direction. Unsurprisingly, his team resented what felt to them like micromanaging. Tommy felt overworked and underappreciated. His team felt undervalued, under-challenged, and demoralized.*
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> *His boss asked one of us (Bill) to work with Tommy—to help him focus on what she needed most from Tommy: Enterprise strategy, reorganization, offshoring, and cross-business collaboration.*
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> *As we worked together, Tommy acknowledged that his impatience to get to a solution often made him annoyed at his team members, and he expressed frustration when he found himself sitting in a meeting, knowing the answer, and not hearing anyone tell him the solution.*
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> *I asked, "Why do you need to sit in those meetings? What would happen if you asked them to come up with solutions and present them to you?"*

Tommy quickly began to realize that he was avoiding the more complex and long-term aspects of his work where he had less confidence.

His core job was to build collaborative relationships with senior leaders of lines of business, manage groups whose objectives and rewards were in conflict with his, and deal with complex problems that had no obvious solution.

> *Tommy stepped back and let his team sort out the operational problems. He discovered that, without his involvement, they often came up with reasonable solutions. And when they did not initially find a reasonable answer, he started redirecting them and letting them go back to work the problem more.*
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> *Tommy's boss eventually noticed that he had freed up time, and told him, "I've been waiting for you to figure this out." As Tommy confronted his self-doubts, he was able to focus more on the high-level relationships and the complex challenges that really deserved his attention.*

Sometimes it is faster to do it yourself. Or, you may just fall back on what you find to be rewarding or gratifying. Think of this like "mowing the lawn," or "doing the dishes," because the tasks are simple, well-defined, and have a beginning and an end. They rarely require the level of skill the individual brings to the table, but it is much easier (to continue the analogy) to wash the dishes than to figure out how to redesign the kitchen to include a dishwasher.

Tip for Leaders

Just because you are better at some things than your people are doesn't mean you should do them. Your technical expertise is important. But that is not what you are paid for, and when you dive into a problem that calls for your technical expertise you lose hours of the most precious commodity of all—time. And your people learn nothing. Because you did the work yourself, your organization is no better equipped to do the work next time. You unintentionally teach your people to do sloppy jobs, since they know you will overrule or fix their work. They stop bringing their A game.

Doing the Job You Wish You Had

One of the quickest paths to losing influence and impact comes from trying to do jobs that belong to your colleagues. Many clients have told us, "My colleagues aren't getting their work done! And when they do, it's inadequate. That prevents me and my team from being successful. They should let me take that on." These individuals rarely see themselves as self-interested. They are trying to help their manager, or the organization, succeed more quickly or operate more efficiently. They are trying to have more impact.

But the results are bad. Colleagues come to believe that you see yourself as smarter, more experienced, or more capable than them. They see you as self-interested or self-promoting. This creates a negative spiral in which your influence and impact drops precipitously. Peers stop cooperating. This causes you to push harder since less work is getting done, which increases their lack of collaboration. One person Bill observed while working with a start-up fell into this trap.

> *Rohit was hired to manage consumer marketing for a start-up clothing company, based on several years' experience in a large company, where he developed a fledgling direct-to-consumer segment for the company. When he arrived, he was given responsibility for print and e-business development, while social media, institutional sales, and private label deals were left to others.*
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> *Almost immediately, Rohit started lobbying to take over other marketing functions. First, he sought responsibility for social media, arguing that the two had sufficient overlap that they needed to be managed together. At the same time, he pushed to take over institutional sales. He argued that the experience from his previous company made him more qualified than anyone else in the organization.*
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> *Unfortunately, Rohit had not yet demonstrated any growth in the direct-to-consumer segment. His peers found his efforts to take control arrogant and irritating. The CEO insisted that he demonstrate success in his own sphere before taking on any other roles. In spite of this, he kept lobbying to take on more responsibility, which frustrated everyone. The CEO rapidly lost confidence in him because of his lack of success in his primary role, and became increasingly intolerant of his attitude.*

Instead of taking on colleagues' jobs, some individuals try to take on their own manager's job. We observe this less often, probably because the manager usually moves to stop the behavior quickly. For some people, however, they do not seem to understand the difference between their job and their manager's job, and eventually end up in a power struggle to prove they are equals.

A corollary of this is the person who believes they do not have to discuss their activities or decisions with their manager and should be given total autonomy to make decisions and take action within their remit, without input or oversight. The consistent message we have heard from these individuals is, "I know how to do my job. Why does my manager need to get involved in 'the details?'"

Doing What Is Familiar

Some people we have worked with struggled because they were uncomfortable with the responsibilities of their new job. Often, when someone is promoted, they do not immediately understand what the expectations are. Moreover, the new job frequently requires knowledge and skills that weren't required before, which makes them feel insecure. One recently promoted manager said, anxiously, "They handed me a report and told me to come to a meeting to discuss it. I don't have any idea what the report means!"

As first-time managers, you may not feel comfortable directing others, or giving feedback. As senior leaders, you may find you are managing people who know much more about the subject matter than you do. Handling these transitions requires three things: Comfort with uncertainty; familiarity with your generalizable skills; and deliberate and effortful thinking.

Because of discomfort with not knowing all the answers, many people risk falling back on what Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman describes as intuitive thinking.[iv] You revert to established knowledge from the last job you had. Kahneman summed up the argument in his *2002 Nobel Prize Lecture*. In it, he described intuition as "thoughts and preferences that come to mind quickly and without much reflection," as opposed to a more controlled, structured way of thinking things through.

If you are using your intuitive or "System 1" thinking to solve the problems of a new job, you are likely managing at too low a level, underutilizing your team, or responding with short-term moves rather than proactive efforts to drive the business forward.

> *Kristy was a skilled product development leader who understood the systems and processes needed to bring products to market. Her manager, Aaron, valued her work and knew he could count on her to deliver on their quarterly objectives. At the same time, Aaron knew that customer needs were rapidly evolving and saw Kristy focusing on the short-term rather than the mid- to long-term. As a result, Aaron had concerns that Kristy would not be able to help the firm take advantage of new technologies to accelerate change and anticipate new trends.*
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> *Kristy and her team were working on 12 product development initiatives, but she made the vast majority of decisions herself. She was frustrated that her people were not stepping up to take responsibility. I (Bill) asked her what would happen if she had the right people to lead these initiatives, and she half-joked, "I'm not sure I know what my job would be."*

In reality, Kristy's job would become what Aaron was looking for: forward-thinking, change-focused, and strategic. As she grew to understand that, she reworked ten of the 12 initiatives into four major strategies, and stopped two of the initiatives that did not fit the framework. Team members each led one strategy, and they clearly defined the decision rights and escalation criteria.

Kristy's team meetings shifted from weekly tactical decision-making to bi-weekly oversight, challenge and course-correction, while bi-monthly meetings became more future-focused and talent-focused. After a few weeks, Kristy found that she had free time, and began working on an innovation white paper that became a potential roadmap for a new product framework for the company.

Doing What You Expected

Doing exactly the job in your job description, rather than the job the company or your manager needs you to do, does not help you influence anyone. The need for flexibility is common in start-ups, where most job descriptions say, at the bottom, ". . .and any other responsibilities as they are identified by your manager." Successful people in start-ups and fast-growth companies often need to learn new skills, shift between two different sets of responsibilities, or multi-task. In more stable, large companies, a "can-do" spirit is invaluable, but people often learn to only do what their job description says. Unfortunately, this does not build your reputation as a problem solver or "go-to" person.

Sarah took a job at a cloud-based technology company as a software trainer. Her job was to learn how the software works and put together and deliver training programs to the end users. She enjoyed getting in front of a group, using technology, and showing them how to use the system. She found it gratifying to see people learn the skills she had to teach.

When her company was bought by a larger software company, a number of people left, and her new manager asked her to take responsibility for implementing the software as well as do the training. She politely but firmly refused, stating, "I'm a trainer. I don't want to do implementation. It's boring." Her manager explained that the implementation team was stretched thin, and in order for her to have enough training to do, she would need to help with the implementation as well. Despite this, she again refused.

You can imagine what happened. In three months, as soon as the amount of training work decreased, she was the first to be let go.

Doing It "Your Own Way"

Influence comes when you can work and communicate with colleagues in ways that say, "We are on the same team." Your organization has a set of cultural norms that determine how people share information, make decisions, and work with each other. These mores are rarely explicit, but they are widely shared and reflect the organization's needs, motivations, and beliefs.

In particular, people often think about their relationship with their manager differently from how the manager defines it. Your manager, and your manager's manager, have sets of implicit norms that are usually subsets of the organization's rules. For example, if your manager is insecure, they may rely on you to support them rather than supporting you. If the functional head is a "bias to action" leader, they may think everyone should operate the same way.

Many times, the company's explicit values are different from the behaviors and attitudes they reinforce in reality. Learning the organizational and team culture will increase your cultural agility, which has value in any new setting. Listening and communicating effectively is essential to increasing your influence and impact. Adapting to the culture-as-is is critical to getting the types of rewards and reinforcements you are looking for.

Whom We Tend to Blame—And Why It Doesn't Work

It is human nature to want to blame other people for the problems in which we find ourselves.[v] Our sense of self tells us we are right, and that problems arise because others have misunderstood our intent, or because they are unfair or have ulterior motives. Some people blame themselves, but the majority maintain personal equilibrium by externalizing problems, even though that may not lead to the best solution.

> *Linda had been brought in by the president of a small company, Akito, as his head of HR. In reality, he really wanted Linda to handle many tactical and operational issues that he, as CEO, did not want to deal with. She sat in on meetings and frequently provided direction to other team leaders, even though she had no involvement in their work. If anyone challenged her, she pushed back by drawing on the CEO's authority. "Akito made it clear to me that he expects this from you."*
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> *The team was clearly unhappy with her ambiguous role, and developed a noticeable passivity toward her directives. I (Bill) was brought in by Akito to help Linda be more effective, but when I tried to*

help her find ways to give direction, through influence or from her own authority, she rejected the idea that she should do anything different. "They just resent my relationship with Akito. If they don't improve, we may have to find other people who will listen."

Focusing on Your Manager

Managers make or break a job experience.[vi] The problems with managers are legion—from micromanagers to laissez-faire, from domineering to passive, and from abusive to neglectful. Some managers are poor managers. Some were promoted because they were a strong front-line worker, or they have seniority. Others are given unrealistic responsibilities and are browbeaten themselves. More have the right technical skills but have no training or experience in managing. Management is, after all, a learned skill rather than an innate talent.

At least as often, there is a mismatch in style or misalignment of objectives between manager and employee. When the two expect different things, or have different workstyles, problems are likely to follow. A hands-off manager may be exactly what one person, who is self-confident, risk-taking and focused, needs to be successful. That same manager may be exactly the wrong one for a person who needs clear, specific direction, tries to avoid missteps, and works best with detailed plans and timelines.

When you and your manager are misaligned, tensions grow. It invariably leads to anger and disappointment for both. For example, an employee thinks their job is to collaborate with their manager to develop ideas and brainstorm in a meeting, while the manager is expecting a well-considered proposal with pros and cons and a recommendation. Unless the team member accepts the manager's view of the job, they are frustrated by the manager's refusal to help them, and the manager views the employee as underperforming.

We try to get our managers to give us what we think we need, or what has worked for us in the past. But as a supervisor once advised, "Bill, you'll be much happier if you figure out what your supervisor is good at and learn that. Trying to get your supervisor to give you what you think you need to learn is much more frustrating."

Focusing on Your Team

People often attribute problems at work to the people who work for them. Just as employees tend to blame their managers for many problems, managers tend to think that failures or misses are due to "weak players" and look for ways to replace them. Both authors have known managers who have an endless cycle of replacing team members, all at once or one at a time, never stopping to think that the problem may be themselves instead of their team.

Replacing team members may be necessary, particularly when a new leader comes into a role and has a different vision, strategy, or mandate than the prior one. At some point it is the job of a leader to make the most of the people they have rather than continuously blaming the individuals for what is actually their own responsibility. The manager's manager and others start to notice this pattern of blaming the team members, and the problem with the team becomes a problem with the manager. Before long, the organization is looking for a new leader, rather than new players.

Focusing on Your Company

Just as there are managers whom no one can work for, and teams that need to be replaced, there are companies whose vision, culture, and values are either objectively wrong, or wrong for you. When you find yourself working for a company that is focused on self-enrichment, and your values lead you to provide for others, you may need to consider moving on. However, attributing difficulties in your job performance to the company may mask the difficulties you have in adapting to the environment you are in. You may be externalizing responsibility for your own difficulty accepting that we all have to adapt to our environment to survive. Keep in mind that, unless you are in a position of significant authority, you are not likely to substantively change the company you work for.

Why Externalizing Rarely Works

Attributing responsibility to others severely limits your options. If you see the difficulties as lying outside of what you are doing and how you are doing it, you can only do two things: Try to get the "other" to change or find a better "other." The former is difficult, because the others feel blamed, which makes them angry, hurt, and defensive. Moreover, the behaviors you find problematic likely have been working for them. The latter is time-consuming, and you have no guarantee that a new job is going to give you a better experience than your current one.

By contrast, assuming responsibility for finding a solution to feeling like you aren't succeeding gives you a wide range of options to develop and demonstrate your value. Even if you do decide that the current situation needs to be changed, we recommend spending some time making sure you are doing what is really needed to succeed before jumping ship.

Getting Unstuck

In summary, many of our efforts to contribute to the organization paradoxically cause us to lose influence and impact. We try to do more, or do what we know best, or what feels safe, unconsciously leading us to detract from our value and weaken our impact. The actions we take are a response to our attitudes, emotions, and underlying beliefs about ourselves, others, and our organizational context. The good news is that you have the ability to turn the tables and increase your agency and effectiveness. What you prioritize, where you and your team focus attention, and how you act, respond, and communicate can be changed to make it clear you are aligned to your manager, your function and the organization.

To be clear, there are times when the feeling of being stuck has nothing to do with you. You may be in a bad situation or there is a difference in values or style that cannot be overcome. Until you find that out, however, you have many more degrees of freedom when you focus on yourself. Start by framing the problem as something you can control, and change may be more actionable than trying to change others or looking for a new job. Our next chapter will make it clear how you can enhance your value to the organization, and help you expand your influence and impact on others.

Key Takeaways

Get what you want by doing what your organization needs. The one change you need to make is to shift your attention from the temptations of doing what is comfortable, what is familiar, or what you wish, to doing what is most important to the organization.

End Notes

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