

Influencing Skills and Its Role in Business

It is important to influence and coordinate well with individuals in cross-functional teams at different layers – at the higher level, with peers and also with direct reports. While it comes to dealing with cross-functional teams, the situation becomes tricky as there is no direct hierarchical influence that one can exert on people in other teams.

In many cases, people may be a part of a project team, a cross-functional workgroup or a task force and it becomes imperative to use influence or persuasion to get things done and achieve the objectives.

To be successful, one may need to exert influence

- Upwards to convince the boss
- Horizontally at the peer level to get things expedited
- Within one's hierarchy to keep team members motivated and get things done.



There is a need to convince and persuade individuals across layers and teams to achieve individual and organizational objectives. In this emerging scenario, one cannot underestimate the role of 'influencing skills.'

Role of influencing skills

In order to be successful in the current role, it is important to conceive an idea and also 'sell' it to key stakeholders in the various teams internally as well as externally within client organizations. One may come up with a brilliant idea or a solution, but the acceptance of the idea for implementation can often pose challenges unless one carves out a plan to 'influence' key stakeholders. In my experience, I have realized that this can often be a prolonged process and may take months before the idea can see the next steps towards execution.

Exerting undue pressure can often become counter-productive with bruised egos and unhealthy conflicts. The negative consequences can be seen by way of delays, time and cost overruns and ineffective execution. Pressure or force (as one may call) can often lead to 'win-lose scenarios' and this can create a feeling of discontent among engaging parties, whether it be individuals or teams, leading to eventual loss of good-will and adverse relationships.

The ability to move others to achieve significant objectives is when one can find a way to become 'inclusive' – in such a manner that everyone wins in the process (individual, internal as well as external teams, if they, too, are involved). An all-round 'win-win' feeling can be created only when 'influencing skills' are brought to the fore by parties concerned. The ability to influence forms the cornerstone based on which objectives can be achieved and results can be sustained over a longer term.

Employees are under stress to achieve more with lesser resources these days. There is invariably the need to take quick actions and translate actions into results. One needs to collaborate through the power of influencing and persuasion to make up for lack of knowledge and skills in a number of areas and seek contribution from others. Technology has enabled teams to operate globally and it is important to harness talent and capabilities available globally for the realization of objectives. While this is a reality, it is important to note that influencing and persuasion can play a key role in bringing together diverse teams for overall success.



The Six Basic Tendencies

According to Robert Cialdini, six basic tendencies of human behaviour come into play when exerting influence to achieve a favourable outcome. These are:

- Reciprocation
- Consistency
- Social validation
- Liking
- Authority
- Scarcity

These six fundamental tendencies impact our organizational and business dealings. They also impact our personal relationships and the way we interact with people around us. The awareness of these behaviours and their conscious application during interactions will lead to a healthy and mutually growing relationship.

In order to use the art of influencing, it is important to build relationships. Good relationships catalyze the process of influence. Building credibility is an important element in the art of influencing. To exert influence effectively, one must be perceived as being credible and trustworthy. 'Self-orientation' quotient needs to be low which means that one is working for the good of the overall organization and selfish motives are ignored.

Six basic tendencies through which influencing can be impacted are outlined below:

- **Reciprocation**

It comes into play when one is trying to effect a favourable outcome. It is about exchanging something of value in return for something an individual wants. There is also the underlying assumption that a favourable action will be repaid at a future date. If we want our peers to collaborate with us and contribute their skills towards the efficient completion of our project, then we also have to reciprocate by helping them in their career progress in some way. As long as this reciprocal relationship works, we can expect to get collaborative skills from our peers.

- **Consistency**

We are driven to remain consistent in our attitudes, tendencies and actions. If we take a position or agree with something, we tend to be consistent later. So, as part of this strategy, one can take an agreement on something that is innocuous or reasonable and then seeks an agreement on something else that is more serious.

- **Social Validation**

When people are uncertain about what action to take, it is normal to look at others to see what action they are taking. At times, one seeks a social validation from a small group before the meeting and this helps him seek a nod from a larger group on an agenda item during the actual meeting. Social validation from the smaller group helps the process. Moreover, social validation provides the approval for an innovative measure that one may take. Otherwise, there may arise a risk of getting criticism from one's peers and seniors for the innovative measure.



- **Liking**

We are more likely to be affirmative with people we like than with those we don't. Research has shown that factors which enhance likability are physical appearance, having things in common, things we are conversant with and people who appreciate us. By adopting an agreeable attitude, it is possible to exert influence on one's peers.

- **Authority**

The point about authority is that people are generally influenced by those in a position of power. This includes individuals in leadership positions, special credentials and knowledge and even those with charisma and distinctive confidence.

- **Scarcity**

The ability to influence is often determined by scarcity. The extent of bargaining power that one may have over another in a deal is often decided by the scarcity of an entity or idea. Those in a scarce situation may be more willing to settle for greater bargaining terms, while those in affluent condition may be more unwilling to give too much of space during negotiations.

Conclusion

In the fast-paced world of today, where organizations are being driven by rapid changes such as globalization of the workforce, diverse cultures and technological innovations, it has become important to build decisive and swift employees who can quickly turn things around and overcome challenges. Influencing skills play a major role on the basis of which individuals can operate through 'earned' power rather than 'legitimate' or 'hierarchical' power. It can act as an enabler through which effective negotiations can happen, team members can be persuaded, well-rounded and meaningful discussions can take place, resulting in time and cost saving as well as organizational effectiveness.



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