

Using Influence to Get Things Done

Convincing your peers to follow your lead requires a blend of skills according to Perry Buffett, a senior associate with Booz & Company who specializes in leadership alignment and organizational change. In a recent strategy + business article, he cites the example of a VP who knew that she would step on the toes of the executives whose areas would be affected by her cost reduction recommendations and where she didn't have the power to force any of them to accept her plan.

Contrary to the "buck stops here" image of the CEO, most major decisions in large companies are made collaboratively. Senior managers work together in small groups such as boards, councils, and committees and often arrive at decisions informally. Even when the CEO makes the final decision, groups of executives usually play an important role in formulating it. Thus, an executive's ability to influence peers and superiors as they undertake a broad range of crucial decisions is a valuable skill — a skill that Buffett calls influential competence.

How does a manager develop influential competence? To answer this question, Buffett analyzed the methods of executives who are able to convince their peers to take on tough and potentially divisive problems and solve them through consensus and action. Through his study, he identified five critical factors to using influence effectively.

1. Build up the courage to raise difficult problems. Most people find it difficult to lead committees because they don't want to do anything that might hurt their career. But leading from within is easier if you are able to communicate the problem and offer a viable solution. Poll the group for agreement, but make sure that if there is disagreement the group understands that now is the time to make it known.

2. Leave your personal agenda at the door. Although the ability of executives to influence others often enhances their careers, self-aggrandizement isn't their primary motivation. Some executives forget this fundamental truth and play politics to build their power base. They forget that personal success is a by-product of serving their companies well. With few exceptions, these executives lose their credibility with peers. Their motives are questioned and they eventually lose the support on which their influential competence depends.

3. Rise above the game, but don't ignore it. Executives who have developed influential competence are expert advocates. They enlist the support of their bosses. They can also identify the formal — and informal — power brokers in a given setting and establish a personal dialogue with them prior to presenting the problem for consideration to the group as a whole.

4. Engage the group using emotional intelligence. Display a humble attitude and deliver a fact-based presentation. You have to prove everything that you say in terms of costs and benefits. Actively solicit the thoughts of the group and listen respectfully to all members of the committee regardless of rank or role. Encourage open debates that give the group an opportunity to understand the choices and the trade-offs.

5. Be tenacious, because decisions do not necessarily guarantee action. Be wary of group silence. If the group reaches a decision but afterward nobody acknowledges it in either positive or negative terms (that is, no action is being taken to implement it), it's important to figure out which additional levers need to be pulled to actively engage others. Don't assume; monitor and always follow up to reinforce the decision. You have to identify barriers and get people to open up about what they are doing to overcome them. You also need to communicate up; your bosses have their own agendas and unless you educate them and inform them about your progress, they could very easily send everyone off on a different tangent.

The payoff for using influential competence includes gaining a great deal of credibility among your colleagues. But just as important, is developing a collaborative approach to decision making that will provide your co-workers with a model for undertaking and resolving difficult problems in a less contentious and ultimately more successful way.