



Managing Yourself

# Strengthen Your Ability to Influence People

by Ben Laker and Charmi Patel

August 28, 2020



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**Summary.** There are two kinds of influence. If you aspire to be a leader, you must understand transformational and transactional influence. Transactional influence is often used in top-down, hierarchical organizations and is focused on the tasks to be done. This kind of... [more](#)



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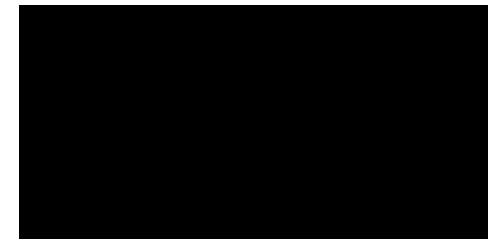
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Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Do you aspire to be in the C-suite, leading people and driving change? If you do, you'll need to master the art of influence — a skill which, like any other, can be learned.

Influence can be defined as the ability to affect the character, development, or behavior of someone or something, and it requires developing a strong emotional connection with yourself and others. Those who master the art of influence are often skilled at tapping into the emotions that drive people's actions. This explains why influence is synonymous with leadership. Behind every great leader is an army of followers acting in support of their mission or cause. In fact, when Time magazine [ranks](#) the 100 most influential people globally, their largest group isn't comprised of sports stars, musical icons, or philanthropists, but leaders such as Michelle Obama, Xi Jinping, Jacinda Ardern, and Bob Iger.

How do they do it?

We recently conducted a meta-analysis to answer this question. Our ultimate goal was to discover how the most influential leaders have mastered the art throughout history, and which forms of influence are



still practiced by successful leaders today. The Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive, a library of 200 years of data for more than 200 countries, was an excellent starting point. Our search criteria was to identify books and articles from a database of 700,000 where the terms “leadership” and “influence” appear within the same publication.

To our surprise, two approaches were heavily discussed, so much so that 95% of the publications we identified stated these terms almost as frequently as “leadership” and “influence.”

The first approach — transaction — emphasizes actual, actionable transactions between a leader and their subordinates. It focuses on improving an immediate situation by determining the steps that need to be taken in the short term. In the second approach — transformation — leaders act as role models and motivators who offers vision, excitement, encouragement, morale boost, and satisfaction to the followers.

After we narrowed down these two common approaches, we wanted to know how and if leaders still use them today. To figure this out, we surveyed 1,000 high-performing leaders in 17 countries and 11 vertical markets, including finance, insurance, pharma, and technology, and asked them the following questions (among others):

- How do you influence others?
- How frequently do you deviate from this approach?
- Do you consider yourself to be a leader or a follower?
- How can you increase your influence?

Our findings confirmed that transactional and transformational influence continue to be the two most prevalent ways leaders exert their power over others today. Before you can master the art of influence yourself, you need to understand both of them.

## **Influence by Transaction**

We found that executives, or people in positions of authority, often use transactional influence at workplaces with a top-down, hierarchical structure — meaning people at the top of the company, like CEOs or senior management, make key decisions that are acted upon by the rest of the organization. As such, this approach succeeds in a crisis, as well as in projects that require linear and specific processes.

Twitter is one example of a company that appears to run in this way. When we interviewed Bruce Daisley, who was then Twitter's vice president for Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), he explained that when he's leading a team, he's ultimately in control of what takes place on that team and is quite direct about what needs to happen to reach their goals. "I don't believe in sugarcoating my communication, artificially prefacing the message with positivity or taking the easy option of 'leadership avoidance,'" he said. While those who don't know him well may find this a bit uncomfortable, they soon come to trust him and recognize he avoids ambiguity and accelerates understanding. He deals in facts rather than opinions and expects others to apply rationality to their argument.

Whether they do this by carrot or stick, or not, leaders like Bruce who use transactional influence don't necessarily build a personal bond with their subordinates. Many of the leaders we studied told us that as a result of this lack of personal connection, they find it difficult to affect people's behavior over time — at least without coming off as overbearing and causing their teams (and themselves) stress. As a case in point, Bruce is currently searching for a cure for employee burnout. Therefore, our study concluded that while influence by transaction is useful, it only works for the short term.

## **Influence by Transformation**

We found that other leaders get things done by encouragement, support, and going above and beyond the call of duty. Transformational influence is rooted in empathy. It is typically utilized in workplaces with a flat structure. Unlike top-down organizations, in which people at the top retain the most information and power, those with flat structures encourage team problem-solving and collaboration by removing hierarchical layers within the organization, which means fewer direct reports and less leaders.

Karen Penney, a vice president at Western Union, prefers to take a more compassionate approach. “When things are not going well, people need to see how you cope and present your vulnerability. It’s vital to show that you are human,” she said. Though many of us are taught that showing vulnerability is a weakness, Karen believes that letting people know your fears, hopes, and genuine feelings is the first step to building the kind of emotional connection that drives action. Leaders like her, who are comfortable being transparent with their people, often form a deeper and more personal bond with them. As a result, a deeper level of trust is established, and that trust, Karen told us, is the foundation of influence.

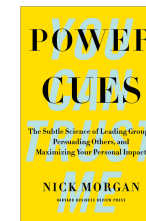
For leaders of the future, who will likely be working within increasingly flat structures, our research suggests that transformational influence is more important to master than transactional — and it is easy to see why those who aspire to lead would be more inclined toward it. The very notion of leadership is becoming extinct as the world moves toward more agile, participative ways of working, and traditional, top-down organizations flatten and dissolve.

## **How to Master the Art of Influence**

Here are four ways to master the art of influence, right now and for the future:

- 1. Build rapport with the people you want to influence.** If you're a first-time manager, spend time getting to know your team, building trust and rapport, and strengthening interpersonal connections. Ask: "What have your past managers done that you'd like me to do, or not do?" This question will instantly establish your credibility and show that you care. Whether their last manager was good or bad, their answers will provide valuable insights, such as what they appreciated most. You may need to reset their expectations and give them a reason to be optimistic.
- 2. Become an active listener rather than a transmitter.** People want to be led by people they like, but that does not mean you should become everyone's friend. As a manager, to be liked is to be concerned, engaged, and empathetic to your team's needs — as their leader, not as their friend. Remember that often you are their touchpoint to the organization's larger vision, and it is your job to keep them aware of the big picture, listen, and provide them with the resources they need to succeed. To be liked and respected by everyone, make sure you're putting aside your biases, being consistent with your communication, and acting on what you hear (not just hearing them out).
- 3. Commit to your team.** If you are not committed to your team, why should they have any reason to follow you? Find ways to show others that you are committed to them on a group and individual level. This is best done by sharing your vision for what success looks like, why their roles are vital to reaching it, and building growth opportunities along the way. Remember, people aren't going to hold themselves accountable if they haven't bought into the same plan, so hold regular one-on-ones that allow you to demonstrate your commitment and simultaneously build followership.

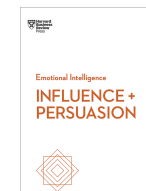
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4. **Be focused and set an excellent example.** The simple act of appreciating your team members, whether through a few words of praise at the end of a tough week or recognizing their critical role in a recent project, can make a big difference in their motivation. As a first-time manager, one of the best questions to ask your people is, “How do you like to receive praise or recognition?” The answers you receive will help you learn how to give your team members praise and recognition most.



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