

Debriefing Jay Conger

Professor of Organizational Behavior at London Business School

Exerting Influence Without Authority

by Lauren Keller Johnson

Congratulations—you've been asked to lead a change initiative! But there's a catch—its success hinges on the cooperation of several people across your organization over whom you have no formal authority.

If you're like most managers, you're facing this sort of challenge more often these days because of flatter management structures, outsourcing, and virtual teams. For those reasons, a greater number of managers now need to get things done through peers inside and outside their organizations. In this age of heightened business complexity, moreover, change itself has grown increasingly complicated. A majority of change initiatives now involve multiple functions within and even between companies, and many such efforts encompass an entire firm.

New kinds of partnerships and alliances have emerged as well, and they require managers to exercise influence over peers from the other companies. Santa Clara, Calif.-based Applied Materials, for example, has 800 engineers and other employees working inside Intel, collaborating daily with their Intel partners to develop successful new products.

In such circumstances, command-and-control leadership—the “I leader, you follower” approach—doesn't get a manager very far. Jay A. Conger, professor of organizational behavior at the London Business School and formerly the executive director of the University of South-

ern California's Leadership Institute, points out that managers and executives at all levels must use a more lateral style of leadership.

Why lateral leadership?

Lateral leadership, Conger maintains, counts among a manager's most essential skills, and comprises a constellation of capabilities—from networking and coalition building to persuading and negotiating.

Though honing these skills takes time and patience, the payoff is worth it. That initiative you're championing will stand a far better chance of being implemented quickly. You'll gain access to the resources you need to carry out the effort. You'll see doors swing open freely to the key players whose cooperation you need most. And perhaps most important, you'll achieve the central purpose of managerial work: getting things done through other people—and catalyzing valuable change for your organization.

A constellation of capabilities

So how do you begin mastering the skills that constitute lateral leadership? Conger recommends focusing on four closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing capabilities:

Networking. Cultivate a broad network of relationships with the people inside and outside your company whose support you need to carry out your initiatives. If networking doesn't come naturally to you, create a personal discipline through

which to acquire this capability. Conger maintains that “certain people are portals to other people—they can connect you to more and bigger networks. You need to build relationships with these individuals in particular.”

Constructive persuasion and negotiation.

Too many managers, Conger says, wrongly view persuasion and negotiation as tools for manipulation. But conducted with an eye toward mutual benefit, they can vastly enhance your influence.

To make persuasion and negotiation constructive rather than manipulative, view the person you're dealing with as a peer instead of a “target.” Take courses and read books on these subjects to hone your skills. And find a seasoned colleague within the company who can serve as a confidant and brainstorming partner.

Consultation. Take time to visit the people whose buy-in you need. Ask their opinions about the initiative you're championing. Get their ideas as well as their reactions to your ideas.

Too many managers, Conger says, rush to define a series of steps that they believe constitutes the right way to carry out their initiative. They then circulate around the company and try to impose their solution on others—mistakenly believing that they're engaging in productive consultation.

The result? Resistance and bickering over process details. “You'll get far better results,” Conger says, “if you commit to and advocate the desired outcome but invite peers to participate in defining the process for achieving that outcome.”

Coalition building. It's a fact of human nature that several people who are collectively advocating an

idea exert more influence than a lone proponent. For this reason, coalition building plays a vital role in lateral leadership. By building coalitions, Conger explains, you gather influential people together to form “a single body of authority.”

To assemble a powerful coalition, begin by asking yourself who’s most likely to be affected by the change you’re proposing. Whose “blessing” do you need—whether in the form of political support or access to important resources or individuals? Whose buy-in is crucial to your initiative’s success?

The challenges of lateral leadership

Though lateral leadership consists of several concrete, interrelated skills, many managers cannot easily master those capabilities. For one thing, Conger points out, they’re often so focused on their own functional silo that they don’t know who beyond their own internal group should be included in their networking and coalition-building efforts.

To combat this “functional focus,” take time to find out who makes things happen in your organization. Whom do people go to for advice and support? And who tends to throw up roadblocks to new ideas and changes? You won’t find the answers to these questions in the organizational chart. As Conger says, you gain a sense of these things through informal contact and casual get-togethers with colleagues throughout the company.

In addition to focusing too closely on their own function, managers experience intense pressure to grapple with what they see as responsibilities more urgent than building relationships. After all, many of them are rewarded for producing concrete, short-term results, Conger notes,

whereas investments in lateral leadership “capital” can take time and patience—and often the dividends don’t come until much later.

So how do you reconcile the need to produce in the short run with the equally important need to lay the groundwork for productive collaboration in the long run? Conger recommends dedicating a specific amount of time each day or week to sharpening your lateral leadership skills. For example, commit to having

Find out who makes things happen in your organization.

lunch each Thursday with a different person inside or outside your organization whom you don’t know well but who may play an important role in a project you’ll be leading.

Conger also recommends getting to know influential people before starting to work with them on a project. For instance, suppose you’ll be leading a project that will involve managers from several other functions and you’ve scheduled a formal kick-off meeting in a month. Seek out those managers in the weeks leading up to the meeting and ask them for their thoughts about the upcoming project.

Creating the right environment

Considering the increasing need for lateral leadership—and its unmistakable benefits—you might assume that companies are moving energetically to train managers in this important area. But, Conger notes, that isn’t the case.

To be sure, many firms offer courses on influence, circulate articles on various aspects of lateral lead-

ership, and establish mentoring programs designed to help managers identify and access “portals” quickly. But formal training and mentoring efforts can have mixed results, Conger warns.

Why? “Successful lateral leadership grows out of positive chemistry between people. You can’t predict or control the natural affinity people have for one another—that glue that makes relationships of mutual influence possible.”

Rather than “matching people up” through a formal mentoring program, companies have far more success by creating opportunities for people to mingle—and then letting them forge mentoring and networking relationships on their own. Conferences, seminars, and company-sponsored social events provide opportunities for people to get to know peers with whom they might not otherwise interact.

Chemistry becomes even more important, Conger adds, in virtual teams. In these increasingly common work groups, members have few chances to meet face to face and engage in the “sizing up” that humans do instinctively. Without these non-verbal exchanges, people can’t build the trust that makes lateral leadership possible. Thus, people on virtual teams must be particularly intentional about their networking. Face-to-face meetings—even if they require expensive travel—are often well worth the cost. Lunches, coffees, and other casual social gatherings can further cement working relationships.

As the business landscape continues to shift, companies will need managers who can exercise lateral leadership with increasing skill and confidence. But because many firms still don’t invest explicitly in cultivating this talent throughout their workforces, managers would do well to take the initiative themselves. ♦

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