



Book Building Influence in the Workplace

How to Gain and Retain Influence at Work

Aryanne Oade
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Recommendation

Developing influence at work is a skill you can and must learn. British psychologist Aryanne Oade, a knowledgeable, practical teacher, presents case studies that demonstrate how to employ influencing techniques to sell your ideas and yourself to your colleagues. At the end of each chapter, the author asks you illuminating questions based on your own experience. While Oade’s contribution isn’t deep in new ideas, she does provide a good orientation, and her advice helps you consider other people’s perspectives. *BooksInShort* recommends her insights to anyone who wants to boost their influence. Everyone who works with other people will find it helpful.

Take-Aways

- No matter what position you hold, gaining influence at work is critical to accomplishing your job and succeeding in your career. You can learn to be influential.
- Being great at your job means little if your colleagues regard you as unpersuasive or powerless, but influencing them requires thought and planning.
- Don’t assume that what matters to you matters to others.
- Learn to appear fully in touch with the agenda of whomever you want to influence.
- Employ different strategies to affect different people by tailoring your tactics to each person’s style, values and preferences.
- To persuade those who want to control events, stress the utility of using your ideas.
- For those who focus on structure and quality, be logical and target great results.
- To influence people who like to build rapport and relationships, you must dwell on teamwork and collaboration.
- For those who facilitate and network, explain how your ideas build their prestige.
- Reputation alone isn’t enough. Keep working to become and stay influential. For real influence, never waver from your sense of what is right and wrong.

Summary

Gain Influence on the Job

To influence others at work, consider these alternative scenarios: A dedicated, expert management consultant is in an elevator with a powerful partner from another division of his firm. The consultant is doing a superlative job of handling a temperamental client. The partner asks how his assignment is going.

“It takes effort to remain influential.”

In the first scenario, he responds: “I have had to spend many hours after work taking my client through the process in a series of one-on-one meetings.” The consultant

thinks this shows him as hard working and determined. Yet after he speaks, the senior partner icily disengages. She wonders if the firm has assigned the right person to the job.

“The unofficial connections between people...determine what decisions get made, which projects receive funding and support, which ideas receive sponsorship, who gets promoted, and even who gets hired and fired.”

In the second scenario, the consultant looks directly at the senior partner, says things are moving smartly ahead and notes that he enjoys working with the client. He says nearly everyone considers the client impossible, but that he's pleased to work well with her. “I have built an excellent relationship,” he says. “She listens to my input and adopts my recommendations. We get on well.” The partner smiles and decides to plug the consultant into one of her major projects.

“Perceptions matter, and poor perceptions can be turned around.”

Here the consultant has a brief opportunity to shape a senior partner's opinion. In the first example, he thinks he's showing how diligent he is, but he's actually communicating that he's a frustrated complainer who's tired of working extra hours with this client. In the second example, he conveys that he's doing a fine job with a difficult customer and finds the challenge energizing. He thinks quickly, understands what is at stake in the encounter, uses limited time to present himself positively and shapes the partner's perception of him as an effective professional.

“The benefit of having greater influence is that it enables you to provide input to the revolving agenda of your organization.”

That's how office influence works. Say or do the right thing, and you promote yourself to others. Say or do the wrong thing, and you harm your career and maybe kill it. When you get the opening to try to make senior executives feel good about you (and build your influence with them), be ready with a succinct summary of your involvement and success in a high-profile project. Never be reluctant to promote yourself to your senior executives. Let them know who you are. But handle yourself with grace and tact; don't be gauche. Plan such valuable encounters in advance.

“The more divergent your values are, the more opportunity there is to see your colleague's strengths as mitigants against your own weaknesses.”

No matter what position you hold, gaining influence is critical to accomplishing your job and succeeding in your career. You may be great at your work and possess enviable skills, but if you cannot positively influence your colleagues and clients, you cannot make a notable impact. Your behavior inside and outside the office – as much as your singular capabilities and expertise – determines how much influence you will have. Indeed, you could be your company's most talented specialist, but if you act like a jerk, your influence will be nil. Don't assume that some people are born persuasive while others are not. With diligence, you can develop and use a wide range of “skills, tactics and strategies” to influence people at work.

Influence at Work

Having influence at work means that you can affect your firm's decisions and persuade others to support your positions. If you have that kind of heft, your opinions carry weight. Do not confuse being influential with occupying a position of power. If you believe that an elevated title automatically makes people defer to you, expect a rude awakening. Just being the boss does not mean you hold sway over people's thoughts or actions. Managers with this mind-set are seldom genuinely influential. To lead others, step back from your daily activities and think about the ideal influencing methods to use with each specific individual. Often your approach will depend on what another person considers important. Size up each situation. Determine how to read and handle specific personalities. Gaining the power of persuasion at your place of work makes you responsible for using it wisely. Do not deploy influence for personal aggrandizement, or to showcase or promote yourself. Rather, use it to help your organization thrive and prosper.

“Influencing Strategies”

Learn to decode the strategies others use to persuade while being fully in touch with your own influencing strategies. Understand that an argument that appeals to you will not necessarily appeal to someone else. While your point of view seems perfectly logical to you, it may make no sense at all to your interlocutor. Your goals are to construct your arguments in a way that others find convincing and to appear fully in touch with the other person's agenda. Often this requires reorganizing and subtly adjusting your presentation – and its positioning – so it resonates with those you hope to influence, especially with those whose buy-in you need. Phrase the introduction to your argument to address their priorities, concerns and objectives.

“Arguments that are influential with you will not automatically prove persuasive with other people.”

Try to determine which strategies will influence a particular person or group, and how. What works with one party may not work with another. To nudge other people, consider their comfort levels, values and perceptions about the issue you want to shape. Plan your approach with these insights in mind. For example, does the person you want to reach respond more to facts or emotion? Is this someone who values process or who prefers to operate in an unstructured manner? Learn the person's style and most potent hot buttons, and tailor your tactics accordingly. The best way to influence others is to think through every facet. Plan strategically. For example, to exert influence during meetings, contact key colleagues beforehand and discuss the essential points you plan to introduce. Gauge their reactions in advance. Forewarned is forearmed.

“The hallmark of a truly influential member of a workplace is that they have learned how to influence specific key people on the specific key issues over which they would like to have influence.”

Establishing and maintaining influence often depends on being able to make astute political calculations about how influential colleagues, especially your boss, will weigh the costs and benefits of a pending choice. In such cases, proposing some compromise solution everyone can accept is often wise. In contrast, you can irredeemably damage your reputation – and your influence – by insisting on a hardline solution many people do not support. Building influence is not a magical or a mysterious process. Learn all you can about the people you wish to persuade and apply this knowledge to plan your methods. With a sincere effort, you can sway most people.

Firmness of Character

You must first understand your own values and personal style, as well as the values and personal styles of those you hope to influence. Those who are unsure of themselves or their ideas are unlikely to sway others. Demonstrate self-confidence. To sustain and retain long-term authority, never expect reputation to be all you need – a common mistake. Instead, continue to do the hard work to become and stay influential. Consistently demonstrate the right behavior to move others positively, such as designing your meetings to deliver the maximum benefit to those who attend.

“Truly influential people use their influence to benefit their organization, not themselves.”

What should you do if a colleague raises an uncomfortable issue with you? If you can, resolve the problem during that initial conversation instead of putting it off and letting it fester. Dealing directly with your colleagues face-to-face is almost always the best tactic. If you do so regularly, you’ll develop a reputation as a straight shooter people can trust and respect. In difficult ethical situations, always stand up for what is right. The greatest way to garner influence is to remain true to your sense of what is right and wrong. Ethical wavering can undercut the personal standing you’ve spent years building. Most of the time, the moral boundaries that demarcate an “illegal, unethical or irresponsible” action are obvious. But if you find yourself in a situation where the ethical choice is indistinct, draw your own line and clearly separate the moral choice from the immoral choices. Always operate on the ethical side of that line, even if it’s hard. You must develop the “verbal dexterity” to “fight your corner” and defend your stance, no matter the rank of the person urging you to cross the line.

“Sometimes you will be in a position where you simply will not be able to get what you want no matter how influential you are.”

For example, perhaps a senior executive takes you aside and asks you to do something unethical. Do not give in and compromise yourself and your future influence. Think carefully about how to finesse the situation and stay clean. Perhaps you can refer the matter to another senior executive, someone with as much stature as the executive who has asked you to do the wrong thing. Maybe you can get that third party to stand up for you against the manager with the unethical suggestion.

How to Influence Four Kinds of Colleagues

“Behavioral styles theory” says you can influence people if you determine which of these four basic value systems and modes of behavior matters most to them and act accordingly:

1. **“Generating momentum, directing events”** – A person with this priority thinks strategically, prefers to take control of work factors, feels frustrated when colleagues stand in the way, approaches situations logically and sets clear goals. This person is motivated by work, comfortable with a big-picture approach, reliant on meetings and precise discussions to set the direction of a project, and inclined to communicate via terse headlines and bullet points. To exert influence: Use facts to create compelling arguments and stress the benefits of implementing your ideas properly.
2. **“Ensuring quality, managing risk”** – This person focuses on delivering top-quality results, depends on operating within a defined structure, pays close attention to risks and establishes detailed plans. This manager does not like to begin projects or make decisions without having the details. Such people carefully monitor their progress, rely on verifiable data, establish reasons for their actions and learn from their mistakes. Their colleagues may think they get too caught up in minutia and create roadblocks. To exert influence: Offer a logical, objective argument focused on results.
3. **“Building rapport, contributing excellence”** – These people prefer the mentor’s role and are strongly committed to their work. They build relationships, take pleasure in their colleagues’ advances, maintain high standards of conduct, feel comfortable discussing conflicts, and thrive amid trust and harmony. These people are receptive to others’ concerns, worry if people don’t appreciate their ideas and hate working with those who abuse their friendly support. Their co-workers may mistake them for pushovers. To exert influence: Stress top performance, teamwork and collaboration.
4. **“Managing perceptions, marketing achievements”** – Such colleagues are great facilitators, collaborators and networkers. They excel at self-marketing, discussion and shaping others’ perceptions. They’re resourceful and enjoy attention, so they’re deft at adapting their presentations to appeal to different audiences. They’re not afraid to experiment with new approaches, but they work best in an unstructured setting. They often miss deadlines, are bored with routine and unhappy working with critical colleagues. These savvy operators know how to develop a case based on the particular politics of a situation. Others may view them as too overtly political. To exert influence: Stress how your ideas will build their reputation and prestige.

“It is often only at the moment of being offered increased influence that people recognize what it means to them.”

If you figure out the behavior style of the person you hope to influence, you can discern how to exert influence based on their values. Tailor your strategy. “Subtle but powerful adjustments in the way...you position your argument can help you win the day.”

Advice for Influence

As you make your plans, heed these tips on influencing others:

- **Never rush events** – Always take as much time as you need to influence pivotal individuals in your company.
- **Leverage your client relationships** – If you are close to your clients, ask them to share their good opinion of you with the executives you hope to influence.
- **Maintain quality** – Never cover up the shoddy work of irresponsible colleagues who could make you look bad. Call them out on their slovenly work. Don’t let sloppy co-workers tarnish your reputation.
- **Use the facts** – Organize and order your facts, and your overall presentation, according to the messages that will resonate most strongly with those you hope to influence. Never base your argument on your personal opinion. What you think may not be what other people – including your bosses – think. You will be far more effective if you present the unassailable facts of the situation and let those facts make the case. Permitting your colleagues to reach their own logical conclusions about the facts is smart and respectful.
- **Remember that priorities change** – Senior executives must be flexible and adjust company strategies depending on the confluence of a multitude of factors. Make sure any input you offer management is up-to-date and relevant in the current situation.
- **Keep your eye on your goal** – Building influence is a long-term project.

About the Author

Psychologist **Aryanne Oade** founded Oade Associates, a coaching and development practice. She is the author of numerous books about common workplace problems.
