

# Influence: Making Things Happen

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*by Mary Mike Pavoni, MS, RRA*

Scenario: You are an HIM professional who is working on a project with a room full of colleagues. Suddenly, one of the team members is asked to attend another meeting. Upon returning, this person announces that he was selected to lead a reengineering design team and needs to select his team members immediately. The HIM department is one of the areas targeted for major process improvement, reorganization, and possible downsizing. The question is, are you going to be a player—and an influential one—on this team?

This scenario is just one example of why it is useful—indeed, critical—to be seen as an influential professional in your work environment. Influence is part of your overall professional demeanor and persona, yet it is not something you can just walk into. You cannot force others to see you as influential, but you can nurture and develop the characteristics that encourage those same people to trust your skills, knowledge, and sincerity enough to give you their support. You earn influence through professional competence, which includes demonstrating self-confidence, emotional control, and the ability to connect with others. These are characteristics that can be learned and practiced, so if you want to make an impact, you must position yourself to be seen as a person of influence.

## Influence Improves Work Life

Some people think "influence" means that someone exerts his or her personality to manipulate or act towards others in a less than honest way. In fact, the opposite is true. A truly influential person is someone who builds trust, credibility, visibility, and relationships through honest, sincere behavior. Perhaps some of us overlook the opportunity to develop our influence because we fail to recognize that possessing personal influence is valuable: "My work speaks for itself," we think. But without relationships, visibility, a mentor, or recognition, our work alone may not be enough to build influence.

Why should we care whether or not we are considered influential? One reason—the person who carries influence has the opportunity to make a positive impact for others. That impact can help increase salaries or improve working conditions. It can even aid compliance to certain regulations. The influential person also affects career growth opportunities for others. So if you feel your professional worth, contributions, and ability to affect positive change are not recognized, you must evaluate these skills and abilities. Once you've done that, it's time to learn the techniques of influence.

Professional influence begins with professional competence, as this is where we all begin making our mark in the work world. After learning the academic principles, we combine what we learned with our experiences—eventually becoming recognized as proficient, even expert, at what we do every day. But competence alone does not make us influential.

## Self-confidence and Competence

Influence begins when others recognize our competence. We must be able to demonstrate on a daily basis that we are the best at what we do. Inherent in this quest for "being the best" is the sense of self-confidence. While self-confidence is second nature for some, others must work at developing trust in their skills, abilities, judgements, and control of emotions. All of these should be in place for the self-confident person to exhibit competence to others.

We also need to be considered credible by others. Credibility recognizes the totality of competence—including our professional beliefs. Have you ever noticed what happens in a meeting when someone makes the statement "in my professional opinion?" People sit up, they listen, and (even if they do not agree) they recognize the entirety of this statement. Thus, credibility is a quality others label us with based on their trust in us.

## Authentic People are Influential

Our behavior, performance, and mutual values must all be in place to earn the trust of others. But if trust is the foundation of all credibility, does this mean we can never make a mistake or have a difference of opinion? Of course not.

One critical factor in generating others' trust is by responding honestly and fairly to a situation. For example, if you do not know the answer to a question, an authentic response would be to tell the person that you do not know the answer, but will find out. Honesty and sincerity make up authenticity, the cornerstone of trust. "I am always honest," "I am sincere," you think. And while you may well be these things, are you comfortable enough to let others see that?

Showing your authentic self is a challenge—not only must you be in touch with your values and perform competently, you must also be confident enough to show yourself as vulnerable to others. Being authentic requires revealing who you are—a difficult task for many of us. We never learned to outwardly express our thoughts at work. Nevertheless, if you want others to have a sense of trust in you, you must learn to communicate openly and honestly. There is no other way to engender others' trust in you.<sup>1</sup>

## **Tell Your Story**

One way to reveal yourself is to tell "who I am" stories that illustrate your values, aspirations, and goals. Telling stories of how you observed someone else succeed, including what they did or did not do, helps others learn about your values and expectations. Two other kinds of stories to help reveal your goals: the "who we are" story, which paints a picture of the kind of group/task force/team required to make the overall picture successful, and the "where we are going" story, which describes the future as you envision it to be—the goals you would like everyone in the group to reach.

This skill—describing who you are and where you are going—allows you to be honest about your aspirations, values, and goals, as these stories and scenarios frame goals in a genuine way.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, learn to frame what you say so that your beliefs, values, and professional expectations are clear to others. You can accomplish this by putting your thoughts into a context that the listener can understand. A good example of framing is the "the glass is half full or half empty" technique. We can describe a situation from many viewpoints, ranging from disillusion, failure, and disappointment to hope, success, recognition, contribution, and achievement. In other words, it's not always what you say, but how you say it that matters.

## **Relationships Engender Influence**

Developing influence requires the ability to form relationships with others. Relationships are built on how others perceive us, which means you must seek out feedback from those around you. That feedback will give you insight into managing your response to situations within the context of accepted organizational behavior. This does not mean you should change who you are to meet the organization. Rather, you must reframe your response to situations. (See "[For Further Reading](#)" for more on reframing.)

## **Generosity Is Important**

Relationships are the cement of influence. Others must recognize your value to the organization for you to become influential. Your work relationships don't have to be deep personal friendships; they may be based solely upon understanding and willingness to work within the constraints of a situation or even the desire to go above the call of duty. Further, recognition is often a returned value—taking the time to recognize someone else's efforts will likely come back to you in some way.

## **Influence Requires Visibility**

To be influential, you must take the risk of self-exposure: step into the limelight and participate. We are surrounded with opportunities to gain positive recognition: volunteer for the blood drive, help at the summer picnic, or get involved with an organization-wide task force. In fact, any effort that results in a charitable act, celebration, or improved process is an excellent way to get started in developing positive visibility.

## **Political Awareness and Influence**

The political aspect of influence requires understanding the pulse of the workplace well enough to know where and when you can provide your valuable expertise. Awareness of the environment is not just good sense—it may mean survival. Listen, read, ask, attend, speak up, be prepared, recognize the culture, and live within the values of your organization. Once this is done, the political aspect will fall into place. But be careful to avoid leveraging a political issue to your advantage. If you are not directly involved in a battle, it is wise to remain on the sidelines.

## Be Proactive

Influence requires a proactive response, which is where political astuteness comes into play. If you know a satellite clinic is going to open and you wish to influence its HIM practices, policies, or procedures, plan how you will approach the clinic administrators. Offer to help by volunteering staff, procedure ideas, or planning time to assist with its opening. Attend the dedication and congratulate those who made it happen. Finally, follow up with a personal note about how proud you are of the new center and offer your professional support. Of course, you must follow through with what you say, but going that extra mile will place you in a positive light among others.

## Influential People are Optimists

Optimism is the underlying premise of influence. "People with high hope are also high achievers. They have higher aspirations and better levels of performance."<sup>3</sup> Look around at those who are influential. Are these people naysayers, or do they combine professional competency with emotional balance, proactive responses, and positive outlook? It is amazing how these qualities—ones that anyone can develop—make such a difference in how we are perceived.

## Influence Requires Practice

Take up the influence challenge. Reinventing others' perceptions of you requires change on your part. And change takes practice. You must first choose to become more influential, design your path to influence, and practice, practice, practice.<sup>4</sup>

### *for further reading*

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## Notes

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2. Tichy, Noel. *The Leadership Engine*. New York, NY: Harper Business, 1997.
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