



Influencing – the skill for success

By Fiona Elsa Dent

THE CURRENT BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT WILL TEST us all and will require financial managers and professionals to use their skills to effectively manage their way through the challenges ahead. One skill that helps people succeed in all walks of life is the capability to influence without authority. This brief article offers insights into this complex area.

Contemporary leaders and business people are increasingly recognising that they cannot simply tell others what to do. They understand that in order to gain commitment to their plans and ideas and to be successful in business they must use their skills of influence. Influencing is the ability to affect others' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours without using force or formal authority. Influencing is essentially an interpersonal and communication skill that largely depends on your ability to interact with others in a way that appeals to them, to gain their attention and commitment.

Typically in business today there are four categories of important stakeholders we all influence on a day-to-day basis:

- Clients – you cannot insist that your clients do something.
- Colleagues – you cannot make your colleagues act against their will.
- Bosses – you certainly cannot force your boss to agree with your point of view.
- Suppliers – you may have the upper hand with these people but even so, the relationship will be more effective if it is based on ethical influencing.

In addition to this, many managers I speak to talk about the issues they face that involve:

- Working across departments in a matrix structure where authority and responsibility are unclear;

- Influencing when working outside their own office such as when travelling and, therefore, having no direct control;
- Influencing across cultures – national and organisational – so no common understanding;
- Influencing others to accept change – where you require buy-in for success;
- Influencing upwards – to get your ideas on the table and explored.

All of this suggests that using authority to get things done is fast becoming a fuzzy, ambiguous concept and the ability to influence without formal authority is even more essential.

The skills of influence

Based on research and observation, there would appear to be a range of skills and attitudes that contribute to an influencer's success:

- **Listening** – probably the most important skill of them all and it's not just hearing what people say: it involves a complex process of questioning, summarising, testing understanding and observing nonverbal behaviour;
- **Verbal fluency** – your own ability to present your ideas in a lucid, clear and confident manner demonstrating involvement and energy for the issue;
- **Probing** – getting to the heart of the issue by asking the appropriate questions and delving deeper until you understand;
- **Awareness of nonverbal communication** – your own and others, and the impact and impression it is creating; ensuring your words and nonverbals are congruent for the message;
- **Rapport building** – getting onto the same wavelength as those you are interacting with to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding;
- **Preparation and planning** – time spent in preparation will pay dividends and should focus on what you plan to say, how you wish to say it and the processes you'll adopt during the influencing interactions;
- **Linking and building** – establishing common ground with others by linking to and building on their ideas;
- **Visioning** – being able to envisage the future and convey a message of what might be;
- **Confidence** – in your knowledge of the topic/issue, in your influencing approach and in your own skills;
- **Patience** – truly effective influencing is never a one-shot effort but rather a process to be followed, which involves time and human emotion, all requiring patience;
- **Flexibility** – being able to adapt and adjust your behaviour, language, style and possibly even your views if appropriate;
- **Trust** – being honest with and demonstrating respect for others;
- **Credibility** – your reputation with others in your influencing network; this is largely based on your behaviour with and towards others and how this is perceived;

- **Courage** – speaking up and out about your values and beliefs, and showing a willingness to take calculated risks when appropriate;
- **Openness** – showing a willingness to listen and to be open to others' ideas;
- **Consistency** – in behaviour and personality so that people know what to expect;
- **Self-knowledge** – awareness of your own strengths, weaknesses, beliefs and values so that you can deploy them to the best when influencing others;
- **Energy** – liveliness and oomph: if you can't demonstrate it about your topic when influencing others, they may not buy in.

These skills and attitudes are frequently demonstrated by successful and effective influencers, both in everyday business life and those who influence in the public eye. Think about the recent US presidential campaign: which of the above skills and attitudes would you attribute to Barack Obama?



Your influencing style

You may have many of the right skills and attitudes but still find influencing a real challenge; often this is because you deploy these skills and attitudes in an ineffective way. Choosing and using the appropriate influencing style/s to suit the environment and prevailing situation as well as your various stakeholders is vital for influencing success. Having the capability to flex your style to suit the needs and demands of the people and situation is a skill in itself – getting it wrong can have a negative effect on your influencing process and outcome.

Influencing, like many other aspects of behaviour, may

become habitual. When influencing, if you over-rely on one set of behaviours you will succeed some of the time but undoubtedly you will also face challenges that may be quite simple to overcome by a simple flexing of and variation in style.

There are two basic influencing styles – **Push** and **Pull**, and within each of these styles there are two sub-styles:

- Push – directive and persuasive reasoning;
- Pull – collaborative and visionary.

Each of these styles has specific features, benefits and downsides (Table 1).

Research has shown that the most popular style used in business today is collaborative and the least popular is directive. However, each style matters and is appropriate in different situations and with different people. A truly effective influencer will diagnose the situation and the needs of the people involved and adopt the appropriate style. Going back to Barack Obama, when you listen to his speeches, it is evident that he understands the importance of this principle. Do you?

And finally...

Remember, influencing is not a one-off action but rather it is an ongoing process. When you are attempting to influence

someone, you may not get immediate results; typically it is a step-by-step process that requires patience and persistence. During this process you will be:

- Creating an impression;
- Establishing your credibility.

In addition to this, you have the opportunity to explore with others to understand their perspective, develop and prepare your case, and continue to get to know the others involved. All of this will help you to plan, prepare and execute your influencing scenario more effectively. As Machiavelli said, "Whoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times." ■

Reference

1. *The Influencing Style Preference Inventory*, obtainable from Ashridge Psychometric Services.

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Push	Pull
<p>Directive</p> <p>This is an 'I'-driven style where the influencer asserts their own views and ideas and expects others to follow. This style is most appropriate when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ You are an expert. ■ You require very speedy action. ■ You are working with new or inexperienced staff. ■ It is a safety, security or time deadline issue. <p>When used ineffectively, your colleagues may judge you to be a bit of a 'bull in a china shop'.</p>	<p>Collaborative</p> <p>This is a team-oriented style where the influencer aims to involve others who will offer views and ideas about the issue. This style is most appropriate when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ You require commitment from others. ■ You want innovative ideas from others. ■ Your issue has no clear answer. <p>If this style is overused or used ineffectively you may be regarded as 'wishy-washy'.</p>
<p>Persuasive reasoning</p> <p>This is an issue-driven style where the influencer wants others to buy into their ideas by presenting them in an even-handed, logical, rational and objective way. This is most appropriate when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Your credibility with others and knowledge about the topic is high. ■ You need to get buy-in to an unpopular decision. ■ There is a 'best' answer and you've done the research to prove it. <p>Overuse or inappropriate use and you may be regarded as a 'tough guy'.</p>	<p>Visionary</p> <p>This is a style where you have to tap into others' emotions, engage their imagination and help them visualise what could be. This style is most effective when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ You are at the beginning of a complex change process. ■ You wish to gain people's attention and whet their appetite for future debate. ■ Innovative thinking is required. <p>Used ineffectively or overused and others may regard you as egocentric or idealistic.</p>

Table 1. The features of Push and Pull influencing styles.
Source: Adapted from *The Influencing Style Preference Inventory*¹.