

Barriers to Influencing

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Following is an excerpt from a forthcoming book by the authors titled "[The Influencing Formula: How to Become a Trusted Advisor and Influence Without Authority](#)."

In a previous article, [The Influencing Formula](#), we discussed our concept of the “formula” to help become influential. There are three main components, namely trust, preparation, and courage. A formula sounds as if it may be an easy thing, but of course it is not. We also know that we should do the right thing for our projects, our business units, and our organization. So what’s stopping us?

There are myriad obstacles, both organizational and personal, that prevent us from being effective influencers. Here are some common ones.

1. Organizational Structure

One obstacle is a hierarchical organizational and communications structure. Many of us work in organizations that are more command and control than collaborative. The organizational structure tends to be hierarchical. That is, there are clear lines of “authority.” Communications tends to be more top-down, coming from the executives or “those in charge” to the workers. And even in organizations with open-door policies, where workers are free to bypass their managers to express concerns or recommend changes, the staff usually goes through a formal chain of command. In addition, many national cultures favor a more formal communications structure, presenting a barrier to effective influence.

2. Organizational Culture

Some organizational cultures are more competitive than collaborative. Business units, divisions, or agencies compete for scarce resources. In these situations, it is not uncommon for each

sub-organization to have its own goals and agendas. Even when the goals of the sub-organizations are aligned with the overall organizational goals, the competition among these units and agencies is fierce. Therefore, the way they go about achieving their goals may conflict with another business unit or agency.

In other organizational cultures, expressing concerns, identifying risks, and making recommendations for changes is not encouraged. The staff in these organizations that do so are sometimes told they do not have a “can-do” attitude. They may be signaled out in meetings or publically humiliated. Such intimidating behavior almost ensures that the staff keeps silent, which not only stifles creativity but also promotes stagnation. Even when the organization as a whole is more creative and collaborative, there might be business units whose cultures discourage speaking out.

3. Time

Following the influencing formula takes time. Building relationships and trust cannot be accomplished quickly. It requires consistency over time. If we betray the trust, it will take time to restore it.

Knowing what we’re talking about also takes time. In order to become an expert, to prepare for our influencing interactions, and to perform the necessary analysis to be credible and to be able to answer questions all takes more time than most of us have.

The rub is, of course, that both building trust and being prepared take time away from our tasks at hand. With tight deadlines and more to get done than we can possibly do, with every email generating what seems like an infinite number of others, many of us are not inclined to take the time for effective influencing.

4. Winging It

While many of us see the benefits of planning, some prefer to be or are best at being in react mode. They are masters at reacting but resist planning. Often these influencers are marvelous tap-dancers who rely on the force of their personal magnetism rather than their expertise. For them, influencing tends to be informal. While this approach might be effective for some, it is less effective for most of us who need to prepare in order to have the confidence to respond appropriately.

5. Political Landscape

One of barriers to effective influencing is being oblivious to the political landscape that constantly evolves in every organization. Likewise, if we are new to an organization, these political considerations take time to learn. Getting to know our stakeholders, their communications style, how to build trust and credibility with them, being able to navigate around the “water cooler coalitions,” and being able to distinguish between the grapevine and the rumor mill all lead to more effective influencing.

6. Fear of Failure

One of the chief reasons that people do not influence is because they’re afraid of being unsuccessful. They fear that a lack of success will be a negative reflection on them. These people don’t have the confidence that they can influence. They let the barriers above stand in the way of trying to do what they know is right.

We believe that when we take the time to build trust and when we are thoroughly prepared, we will have the confidence to effectively influence. We also need to redefine success. We may have failed to persuade in the past. But that doesn’t mean that we have failed to influence. We might not have changed a decision. We might not have convinced a decision-maker to take a particular course of action. However, if we have followed the formula, we might have altered a decision-maker’s thoughts and/or feelings.

For further information on influencing, please view our web page that describes our book, [The Influencing Formula](#). You can order a copy on that page as well.

About Watermark Learning

Watermark Learning helps improve project success with focused business analysis, project management, and business process management training and mentoring. We foster results through our unique blend of industry best practices, a practical approach, and an engaging delivery. We convey retainable real-world skills, to motivate and enhance staff performance, adding up to enduring results.

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