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Managers Effectively Using Influencing Skills to Gain the Support of Stakeholders for Achieving Results

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Abstract

A major expectation for managers is to accomplish results for their work unit that supports the vision and mission of the organization. Because managers are dependent on the efforts and productivity of the stakeholders with whom they work to achieve these results, they need effective influencing skills to use with those stakeholders. Effective application of the influencing principles of reciprocity, commitment, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity, and unity will greatly enhance managers' influence with stakeholders to take the actions necessary to achieve the work unit's needed results.

Keywords: managers, influencing, achieving results

1.0 Context

> "True leadership—authentic leadership—is never an act of control, coercion, or dominance. It is an act of influence" (Bacon, 2012, p. ix).

Managers can accomplish very little without the support of other stakeholders. Influencing skills effectively applied by a manager are crucial to gaining the commitment and support of stakeholders to work collaboratively for achieving the needed tasks to meet work unit and organizational goals successfully. The development of relationships with stakeholders is essential for a manager's success. The savvy manager masters the knowledge and skills requiredto influence others in the work environment to maximize productivity effectively.

Managers are often expected to *initiate change* to improve work unit productivity and enhance the organization's vision and mission. Change can cause apprehension on the part of stakeholders, and managers must influence them to support the needed changes and work collaboratively to meet the challenges posed by such situations. "Influence is the art of getting others [stakeholders] to take your [manager's] lead—to believe something you want them to believe, think in a way you want them to think, or do something you want them to do" (Bacon, 2012, p. 3).

2.0 General Principles for Influencing

As a general guideline, it is helpful for managers attempting to influence others to address the *rule of self-interest*. This rule means that stakeholders often—consciously or unconsciously—are motivated through understanding "what is in it for them" (Cialdini, 2009). Further, when managers are striving to influence others, *providing the reasons* for the object of the attempted influence is usually beneficial to obtaining the desired result.

Effectively influencing stakeholders is greatly enhanced when the manager has earned their respect. Managers need to recognize that: "Respect is something that has to be earned and isn't something that comes automatically with a title" (Patterson, 2015, p. 1). Stakeholders respect managers who have a strong work ethic and are willing to work alongside them to accomplish difficult and challenging tasks. Leading by example can be a strong influencer with stakeholders.

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Managers earn respect from others when they openly admit makingmistakes and seek input from them to resolve problems collaboratively. Managers also gain respect by giving credit to others for resolving difficult situations. Recognizing the contributions of others, and publicly praising their accomplishments, earns managers respect that usually translates into influence (Patterson, 2015).

Hanke (2018) advocates managers can enhance their influence with stakeholders by: (1) maintaining emotional composure no matter what the scenario (i.e., *emotional intelligence*), (2) consistently displaying confidence without conceit, (3) proactively being accessible, (4) regularly recognizing the efforts and accomplishments of others, (5) communicating openness and support through body language, (6) displaying authentic humility, and (7) demonstrating personal interest in others through aiding in their job growth and development.

Persuasion augments the effective utilization of influence skills by a manager. Conger (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2013) explains that persuasion is more than convincing others to see things the manager's way because it is a process of learning from others and negotiating shared solutions. Conger (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2013) advises managers that effective persuasion involves four steps: (1) establishing credibility through expertise and relationships, (2) framing what the object of influencing is by identifying the common good with those whose support is needed, (3) reinforcing their positions by using vivid language in communications and furnishing compelling evidence that includes supportive data, and (4) connecting emotionally with those who are the focus of the influencing efforts (pp.71-72). Williams and Miller (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2013) add that how the information used to influence is delivered is crucial. The information should be tailored to the perspective and interest of each person the manager is attempting to influence.

Cialdini (2016) advances the notion of how *privileged moments*—particularly receptive times to communicate an influencing message to stakeholders—play in a manager's ability to influence stakeholders. Cialdini (2016) elaborates the factor most likely to determine a person's choice in a situation is often not the one that offers the most accurate or useful counsel; instead "it is the one that has been elevated in attention (and thereby in privilege) at the moment of decision" (p. 15).

The concept of *channeled attention* means that stakeholders often assign high levels of importance to influence stimuli advanced by the manager "as soon as one's attention turns to it" (Cialdini, 2016, p. 15). By combining the power of *privileged moments* with *channeled attention*, managers can have a very strong influence on stakeholders.

Positive morale of stakeholders creates a work environment more amenable to a manager being able to influence them because they are more likely to enjoy work and support the manager's desires. Jerez (2018) advises managers to be conscious of seven practices that impact positive staff morale:

- **Avoid sarcasm** because it often leads to misinterpretation by stakeholders resulting in them being unsure of what the manager is attempting to communicate.
- **Be transparent** through openness to discussions with stakeholders that emphasize sharing information and reasons for actions and seeking their feedback.
- **Demonstrate empathy** by seeking information to understand stakeholders' situations and creating personal connections representative of authentic interests in them.
- **Avoid abrasive communications**—in person and writing—by choosing words carefully to prevent being perceived as harsh and offending. When the manager has highly emotional feelings, restraint needs to be exercised to avoid "responding before thinking."
- **Do not avoid uncomfortable situations** regarding problems with stakeholders by objectively analyzing the facts and seeking stakeholders' perceptions of the issues or problems at hand. Unattended problems with stakeholders are seldom solved through inaction by managers.
- **Be consistent** because stakeholders will be supportive of the manager and feel "psychologically safe" from unexpected comments and actions if the manager must abruptly change her/his position on an issue. The manager needs to fully explain to the stakeholders why the sudden change of direction is necessary.
- **Do not micro-manage** because it leads to stakeholders believing that a manager does not trust their competencies. This results in decreased motivation to produce timely and high-quality work. In essence, micro-management prompts stakeholders to "feel disempowered in their roles" (Jerez, 2018, p. 4).

Bacon (2012) advocates influencing is innate to human interactions because there is "a continuous negotiation for agreement or acceptance as we all attempt to exert our will, point of view, or interests" (p. 2). For example, a manager greeting others is an act of influence for which the parties involved often try to persuade each other that they are friendly and welcome interaction. Non-structured informal interactions often form stakeholders' general perceptions of the extent to which managers are viewed as desiring positive relationships. Such positive relationships between a manager and stakeholders are often the foundation of the manager's ability to influence stakeholders.

3.0 Seven Principles for Influence

Cialdini (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2017) has spent a professional lifetime studying how people are influenced. He has developed seven principles that are collectively labeled as *social influence*.

(1) Reciprocity means the manager creates situations for which stakeholders have a sense of indebtedness to him/her for a previous action and feel obligated to "payback" by performing the object of the manager's influence efforts. The astute manager takes positive actions toward stakeholders when no immediate action is needed from them to build up—or warehouse—reciprocal paybacks. Sharing of information and taking cooperative actions toward stakeholders are methods for managers to secure their future support. There is a natural inclination by many people to feel obligated to fulfill influence actions by the manager if they have previously received positive feedback from her/him.

(2) Commitment means that stakeholders have a desire for their beliefs, words, attitudes, and behaviors to be consistent with their values and self-image. Stakeholders also like to be perceived by others as consistent. Hence, once they publicly commit to making a choice or supporting the desired action of a manager, stakeholders are more inclined to follow through and deliver on the commitment. Stakeholders often view consistency as representative of stability, honesty, and forthrightness. Managers need to prompt stakeholders to personally support actions which they desire by committing to them in the presence of others whose opinions the stakeholders value.

(3) Social Proof means that people seek validation that their actions are in line with the actions of others for a given issue. Stakeholders are inclined to do what others do because it reinforces their behaviors and also represents strength in numbers. This phenomenon is often labeled as the "wisdom of the crowd." A manager can influence stakeholders by demonstrating that others support his/her desired actions. Because the social proof theory indicates that stakeholders are primarily influenced by those similar to them, a manager needs to demonstrate to these stakeholders that the colleagues they respect are supporting the manager's position.

(4) Authority means that many stakeholders tend to follow his/her lead due to the formal authority or position power that a manager possesses. A manager's general demeanor and image can create an authority figure—without being viewed as heavy-handed—which helps to influence stakeholders. Some managers have this demeanor, while others must work to achieve it. Managers who have a reputation of promoting and supporting stakeholders by the use of their authority and power, often are successful at influencing stakeholders on the issue at hand.

(5) The **liking** concept is predicated on the belief that "people prefer to say yes to individuals they know and like" (Cialdini, 2009, p. 172). By embellishing the liking concept for influence, managers create a positive image, openness, flexibility, and helpfulness to stakeholders. The anchor to the liking concept is managers continuously building positive relationships and trust with stakeholders.

(6) Scarcity means that when stakeholders perceive that there are limited opportunities to be a participant in a work event, they are more inclined to seek out (and participate) in that event. Stakeholders often view limited opportunities as situations they do not want to "miss out on" for desirable job development and satisfaction. Cialdini (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2017) advocates that managers should "highlight unique benefits and exclusive information" to influence stakeholders (p. 75). Cialdini (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2017) also advises managers to use the "closing window of opportunity" phenomenon to influence, meaning that it may be a long while before an opportunity such as the valuable task at hand is available again for stakeholders (p. 75).

(7) Unity represents identity between the manager and stakeholder being influenced by a "we relationship" or a sense of oneness that "leads to more acceptance, cooperation, liking, helping, trust, and consequently assent" (Cialdini, 2016, p. 17). This positive identity of the stakeholder with the manager facilitates the desire of the stakeholder to "buy in" to the manager's wishes. This banding together through the unity principle prompts the two parties to act "together synchronously or collaboratively" to implement the tasks to meet the object of the manager's influence (Cialdini, 2016, p. 18).

Cialdini (cited in Harvard Business Review, 2017) notes the synergetic application of these seven principles regarding managers influencing stakeholders when stating that: "Although these principles and their applications can be discussed separately for sake of clarity, they should be applied in combination to compound their impact" (p. 77). As he also cautions managers: "Not only is it ethically wrong to trick or trap others into assent, it's ill-advised in practical terms. Dishonest or high-pressure tactics work only in the short run, if at all" (Cialdini, cited in Harvard Business Review, 2017, p. 77). As Van Der Plight and Vliek (2017) note, "efforts to influence people should be open and transparent" (p. 221).

4.0 Closing Thoughts

Managers effectively accomplishing results are a cornerstone of an organization's success (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Managers do not work in a vacuum, nor can they achieve the work unit's needed results by themselves. The importance of developing a coalition with stakeholder groups is essential to the longevity and success of an organization. Managers need to continually seek—or enhance—skills to influence the stakeholders with whom they work in the context of achieving results for which the work unit is responsible and for which the manager is accountable. Managers will become more skilled in garnering the support of stakeholders and achieving the work unit's needed results by consciously focusing on the influence principles of reciprocity, commitment, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity, and unity.

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