

Most organizations are on a low-fat diet. Firms of all sizes are finding external solutions to help them improve top- and bottom-line results. Gone are the days when an organization's ability to deliver a product or service hinged on its own in-house capabilities. As supply chains stretch around the globe, strategic partnerships, co-branding, private-labeling, vendors, outsourcing, acquisitions, and flexible workforce solutions help keep organizations lean, yet create new challenges. As one of my clients so accurately summarized, "In today's business climate it means I need to get the guy down the street, or around the world, to do what I need done, even though he doesn't work directly for me."

But how do we know that the "guy down the street" is getting the job done? And if that person happens to be on the other side of the world and problems arise, how do we resolve issues in a cost effective and time efficient manner? How can we as leaders ensure timely and quality work from an entity that is not directly under our control?

To adapt to this trend, many organizations are finding that well-developed influencing skills are far more effective than the traditional "command and control" approach. A competitive edge is gained by an organization's ability to quickly build strong relationships with key outside contacts. The capacity to effectively influence these contacts remotely is critical as pressure mounts for firms to be better, faster, and more cost-effective.

Many people are brilliant at their particular technical discipline and may be promoted based on technical merit to positions of leadership, but they tend not to value influencing as a relevant skill. The consequences of a failure to influence key players can be particularly challenging.

I've seen this trend emerge in different areas of my practice as a leadership coach. One example that comes to mind is Jay, an accomplished technology innovator. Jay faced serious challenges getting an outside service provider, based in another country, to deliver a large software upgrade necessary for him to stay competitive. In discussions with the vendor Jay would frequently point to the service contract, complain, and demand results.

Long and painful conference calls yielded nothing tangible and absorbed valuable time. Jay later observed that his approach to managing the outside service provider failed because he hadn't built effective relationships with two key contacts. The ability to influence these people would have alleviated many headaches and expedited the delivery of the product.

Another client, Maggie, a well-regarded manufacturing CEO, learned a difficult lesson after buying a smaller rival company with similar products and services. "We bought them instead of building their capabilities in-house to broaden our product set quickly," she said recently. "After the purchase, performance suffered. We lacked an understanding of how to function as one company. We were all frustrated. Looking back, we should have invested the time in clear communication right away. It cost us dearly to work it out over time."

What do these examples show? Building strong relationships and investing in communication simply make good business sense. They set the stage for excellent problem-solving. Based on my own leadership experience, and my coaching practice, I see the value of influencing skills in effective problem-solving. These skills can be developed—or enhanced—by concentrating on the following five areas:

1. Make relationships more important than immediate tasks.

Building strong professional relationships is crucial to sustainable success. There are those who place results before relationships, bulldozing through people to get something accomplished. While this is a short-term way to make progress, sustainable working relationships yield lasting results. Active listening, patience, good judgment, and making appropriate compromises are key ingredients. Leaders who value relationship-building as a critical element in achieving results provide a strong model for others in their organization. This practice promotes the healthy foundation necessary to meet changing demands over time.

2. Rapidly build, and then maintain strong rapport with crucial contacts.

How do we build and maintain a strong rapport with "outsiders" who impact our success? Targeting the correct person or people in the network who can make or break our project is the first task. Once we have identified the "right" person or people, we can develop a productive bond. Whether in person or electronically, the ability to establish rapport from the first meeting onward is a leadership skill that should be practiced every day. It requires us to take the time to get to know the other person. Ask questions about their situation, their goals, and what's important to them. Let go of the impulse to multi-task long enough to hear the other person. If we reserve our attentive, engaged, active listening for "important conversations" then we miss many opportunities for rich, healthy, and influential professional relationships.

3. Actively seek out the challenges confronting those you wish to influence.

Asking "what are you up against right now?" yields vital information. Without it there is simply no way to know how relevant any of your own offers or requests may be to the other person. If you are relying on or working with someone critical to your success and you don't know the answer, it's time to ask the question. If you haven't asked in a while, ask again. Whatever the answer, it will help you find ways to tailor your offers and requests, making them relevant to the other person or organization. Take all the time necessary to understand, and then to confirm, what the other person is up against. In the medium-term this question can mean the difference between success and failure.

4. Develop solutions that address your problems and theirs.

Developing influential relationships means tailoring your needs and solutions to solve the problems of others. Back to Maggie; both the company she acquired and her own team were full of people motivated financially to make the acquisition a success. The acquired company was up against the daunting task of figuring out how to get things done effectively at the parent company.

The parent company was up against demands to make the acquisition perform rapidly in economic terms. Absent the plain-talk needed for each firm to discover how they could solve each others problems and where such problem-solving was missing, reaching their mutual goals took years instead of months.

5. Communicate these solutions clearly and economically.

Economical communication is critical to getting your message across. Given the volume of information we are subjected to each day, understanding your audience and communicating in a way that encourages mutual problem-solving are more important than ever. If you find the amount of time you are spending "having to educate" your audience is greater than focusing on outcomes and how they will be achieved, chances are you are not getting the results you seek. Ask yourself what your audience will find most compelling in the shortest time, and in what ways your ideas can directly address their problems. Then trade in the slide show for an interactive approach.

In an effort to 'trim the fat' organization find themselves on new ground. The concept of accomplishing everything in-house has taken a back seat to the reality of accomplishing more, faster, and at a reasonable cost using "outsiders." Whether down the street or around the globe, we are learning the importance of well developed influencing skills and foregoing the 'bull in a china shop' approach. Competitive advantages now go to those who value, build, and maintain effective relationships. Understanding the concerns, problems, and obstacles facing decision-makers in the equation is the key to developing realistic solutions. Those with strong influencing skills find that a mutual problem-solving approach expands their capacity to achieve goals in an environment of both competing demands and increasing interdependence.

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