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Ginny was a kind caring mother, but unable to persuade her teenage son not to associate with friends who were bad influences on him. Pete was a highly-regarded subject matter expert in his field, but struggled to convince people to adopt his ideas. Susan was promoted into management, but because she lacked the ability to motivate others, she had to rely on her positional authority to get people to perform which didn't go well for her. What is the core issue underlying these three scenarios? People's inability to gain buy-in aka people's inability to influence.

You might think of influencing as manipulating or convincing. It is not. Yes, influencing can be used for dishonorable intentions, but it is more typically used for good. When we try to help people such as in improving a relationship or adopting a better approach, the intent of our influence is honorable. It is positive and beneficial. This type of influence can be the difference between success and failure, being happy or miserable, and even life or death.

Friends offer each other advice to navigate difficult situations. Parents talk to their kids to guide their development. Bosses coach their employees. Coworkers give each other feedback. Parents, teachers, doctors, pastors, counselors, managers, family members, friends, consultants, sales people, and virtually everyone in any position of influence strive to help others and their effectiveness depends on their ability to influence.

Of course, not all communication is done with the intent to influence. When you are sharing stories with friends, talking about your day with your spouse, or giving an update to your employees, you aren't usually trying to influence them. You don't have a desired outcome for which you are hoping to gain their support. You aren't trying to help them solve a problem or achieve something. You are simply having a conversation, informing, or getting work done.

However, much of our communication is done with the intent to influence. Parents try to get their kids to do their homework, behave, and be safe. Bosses exhort and challenge employees to develop and achieve more. Doctors, coaches, counselors, and teachers are paid to help people learn, develop, and change. If you think about how much communication you do with the intent to influence, you might be surprised. Leaders in the workplace can spend more than 90 percent of their time communicating with the intent to influence.

How do people who are effective at influencing do it? What are the best practices of effective persuasion? When communicating with the intent to influence, there are three basics that great influencers keep in mind:

1. **Start with the “why.”** Before talking about solutions, first gain buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity to be addressed. Answer the first questions that people generally have: “Why is this important?”, “Why should I care?”, and “What is the impact of this on me?” Always start with the “why” because people don't typically agree to do something if they don't first believe in the problem, need, or opportunity being addressed.

“Why, What, How” Framework of Influence

2. **Discuss and agree on the “what.”** After securing buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity, turn your attention to the solution. Facilitate the brainstorming and evaluation of alternatives based on agreed-upon criteria. Research and assess the advantages, disadvantages, and risks of the viable options. Select and reach agreement on the solution(s) that best solve the problem, fulfill the need, or leverage the opportunity.
3. **Finish with the “how.”** With agreement on the solution, turn attention to how the solution will be implemented. Since many solutions require changes in thinking and behaving, give considerable emphasis to how mindsets will be shifted, behaviors will be learned, progress will be tracked, and desired results will be achieved. Agree on priorities, budgets, actions, timelines, roles, responsibilities, resources, and the definition of “done.”

In addition to using the why, what, and how, framework, there are three preceding principles to which great influencers give their attention – knowing who to influence, building good relationships, and being credible.

Know who to influence. Know your audience. If you are striving to help someone change their behavior, the target of your influence might be obvious. Or not. Maybe your influence is better given to someone else who is influential in that person’s life. For example, if your adult son needs to change in some way, might your influence be better applied to his spouse? Or best friend? Or in the case of a sales person selling to a large enterprise, who is the buyer to be targeted? The procurement representative, end-user, department manager, senior executive who owns the budget, or is the decision being made by a committee? Know who you need to influence.

Build relationships. Your efforts will be much more welcome and effective when you show you care and have good relationships with the people you aspire to influence. As the cliché goes, people don’t care what you know until they know you care. Your children, employees, friends, clients, business prospects, and family members will be more open to your ideas and eager to receive your advice if they already know and like you. And when you have relationships, you know people better and can personalize your influence.

Be credible. You will only be influential to the extent you are credible. People might like you, but if they don’t respect your knowledge or experience, they won’t agree with you. They won’t trust you. They won’t give your opinion much validity. Know your subject matter. Have direct experience in whatever topic you are expecting others to place their belief.

In summary, before expecting to be influential, know your audience, build good relationships with them to the extent you can, and know your subject matter. Then you are ready to apply the “why, what, how” framework to the specific problem, opportunity, or need being addressed.

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