



Four Keys to Influencing Others
Bruce E. Roselle

Leaders often find themselves in situations where they are trying to influence peers or others who are not in their direct line of supervision. That is, they have no formal authority over these people, but they must find ways to collaborate on projects. Sometimes, when they try to influence others on a project or initiative, the others feel threatened by them or somehow pushed out of their lane.

A couple of recent examples from coaching clients might help to illustrate these kinds of situations. In one, an engineering director was asked by the GM of the plant to create a slide deck to help senior leadership understand the new product that engineering had developed. He had involved several marketing managers in developing the slides, but had not specifically informed their manager, the marketing director, about the status. When the marketing director was informed of the deck at a meeting, he became visibly upset and confronted the engineering director about the lack of involvement by marketing. Apparently, he felt that the slide deck being presented to the sales force indicated that engineering had veered intentionally outside of its lane and into the marketing lane.

In another situation—this one from the nonprofit world—the chair of the Board was holding off on a decision regarding the announcement of a new executive director of the organization to make sure all the legal paperwork was completed before the new person was announced to staff and donors. He received a text from a member of a departmental committee who had some strong feelings about the timing of the new position announcement. This person wrote, “There is no reason in the world that the paperwork is not completed on time. Do this right!”

In both of these cases, different as they are, one person made a fundamental mistake in trying to change another person’s approach to a problem. In the first case, one peer was trying to influence the actions of another peer; in the second case, someone was trying to influence the next steps of a person two levels above him in the organization. In both cases, they made the fatal mistake of assuming they could influence someone else by bullying them. Being aggressive is usually not the preferred strategy in organizational leadership situations, and never effective when trying to influence someone.

What is more likely to be effective when you need to influence another leader at your organization, one who does not directly report to you? Here are four keys to influencing others:

1. **Ask open-ended questions and listen.** This will help you learn more about the thinking and approach of the other person. Listen deeply to their response in order to more fully understand

them. Most situations in which you believe you must change the thinking of another person occur when you believe the other has a viewpoint that is in conflict with yours. In the first example, above, the marketing director assumed the engineering director was purposely moving outside his lane. Had he, instead, asked a question like, “What are you thinking the involvement of marketing should be at this point?” or “How do you think we should proceed with this slide deck, and how should marketing be involved?” he would have discovered that his team was already involved and there was still time for him to influence the final result.

2. **Once you understand, share your perspective.** People are much more likely to listen to your point of view if they see that you are interested in their thinking and have asked questions to better understand. When you are certain that the other person has shared everything they have to say on the topic, and that you fully understand where they are coming from, then begin to share your own point of view on the situation. Be patient before you share. Don’t make the mistake of jumping in assuming you understand, when, in fact, the other person has only shared a fraction of what they want to say. In our second example, had the department member made sure he understood the reason for the delay in announcing the new staff person, he might have shared a different perspective and found the board chair was much more open to it.
3. **Look for possible common ground.** As you provide your perspective, begin to lay the foundation for shared understanding. Look for common ground in what the other has said and what your point of view is; begin to identify values and needs you both share in the situation, and look for ways to build a collaborative solution from there. Almost always, if you look closely, you will find a piece of common ground on which you can shape deeper collaboration.
4. **Move toward a resolution.** If you have spent sufficient time listening to and understanding the other person, and you have subsequently shared your own point of view emphasizing areas of common ground, then moving toward a resolution should be relatively simple. Sometimes, however, even after your perspective and the other perspectives are laid out, there is no clearly defined common ground. Sometimes, shifting to another open-ended question like, “What’s really important to you in this situation, bottom line?” can open up a deeper dialogue and ultimately move you toward resolution.

The ability to collaborate with others when there is no clear line of authority is a competence that will have ever-increasing value in the company of today and tomorrow.