

Influence Matters

WHAT IS IT? WHY DOES IT MATTER? HOW DO I GET IT?

Art Horn. November, 2013



Picture yourself in a waiting room knowing that in a few moments you will be invited to go into a private room next door for a sit-down conversation with a person who was brought in especially for this occasion—just to see you. This will be your opportunity to convince that person to give you exactly what you seek. Perhaps you'll be asking your boss for a promotion. I know someone who imagines asking the principal at her child's school to move her child to a different class. Personally I visualize finally being face-to-face with a prospective client whose business my firm has been longing to land.

The question is: *how do you maximize your chance of success?*

HORN TRAINING AND CONSULTING has been researching the area of influence theory ("compliance theory," in academic parlance) for over 30 years. We have trained tens of thousands of people on the skills derived from that theory.

In fact, influence theory is the common ground of a wide array of corporate soft-skills training programs. People are better leaders, sellers, negotiators, servers, presenters—even teammates—when they develop their skills at building and navigating human relationships. Doctors influence patients to follow prescriptions, teachers shape their ideas to optimize student receptivity, lawyers sell their opinions to judges and jurors, employees convince their bosses, and bosses convince their

employees. As Daniel Pink argues in his book, *To Sell is Human*ⁱ, everybody sells. The corporate world has figured it out and the central topic of *Human Influence* is hot.

This makes sense for many reasons, one of which is the massive expansion of the service sector in the western world. In Canada, for example, the service sector now accounts for 70% of the GDP and 75% of the employmentⁱⁱ. And where there is service, there is influence.

Another reason for the rapid rise in demand for “Influence Skills” as a corporate training topic is the growing realization that making people more influential in their communications has an immediate, self-evident, and favourable effect on all kinds of seemingly behind-the-scenes behaviours that matter. One day an engineer, whose job includes attending sales calls in a support role and who has the regrettable tendency to focus on what *can't* be done, is enrolled in a two-day course to develop his influencing skills; a few days later, he finds himself proudly and honestly talking instead about what's possible. Influence training can do that; it has become the low hanging fruit for organizations looking to nourish bottom line performance.

TYPES OF INFLUENCE

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘influence’ has become one of the top 1000 most frequently used words in the English languageⁱⁱⁱ. In business use it's specifically about getting what you want from others by bringing some tactic to bear, rather than by simply taking the chance that a person will naturally decide in your favour.

There are two broad categories of influence tactics: *direct* and *indirect*. *Direct* influence involves getting what you want from others by virtue of the juicy idea you put in front of them. Whether it's to get the cooperation of a person who works in another department, to enrol a team member in a mission, or to win a customer over, *direct* influence tactics involve clear, attractive, and cogent ideation and argumentation.

Examples of direct influence include:

- making or clarifying a request or proposal
- explaining the qualitative benefits of doing a certain thing
- providing a cost-benefit analysis of a proposal
- suggesting an idea that gives exactly what is wanted
- highlighting why a proposal is superior to other proposals

Indirect influence tactics are the things an influencer says and does that “smooth the way.” That is, they are not directly on-point, but they presumably move things along in the desired direction. They are *satellite*

matters that have the *capacity* to effect—such as when we say one person’s positive attitude has the capacity to lighten the mood of a group.

Examples of indirect influence include:

- demonstrating interpersonal warmth
- being respectful of a person’s status
- highlighting what others have done in similar circumstances
- making it clear that time is running out
- reminding a person of what they previously said
- citing what experts or people of higher rank had to say
- asking for a favour or earning a favour
- exposing personal vulnerability

Indirect tactics can be seen as either ethical or unethical based on things like the motives of the influencer, cultural norms, legal restrictions, policy limitations, and the values and sensibilities of both the influencer and the person being influenced. For example, small talk at the start of a business meeting might seem “fake” for some people and simply appropriate for others. Similarly, taking a customer to a ball game might seem socially appropriate in some communities but look like graft elsewhere.

Indirect influence tactics are more prone to backfiring than *direct* tactics because people tend to be mistrusting when they sense an indirect tactic is being used on them. Contemporary research even shows people are more likely to react negatively nowadays than decades ago.^{iv} The old admonition “flattery will get you nowhere,” is becoming “flattery turns me off.”

Both *direct* and *indirect* influence tactics often get woven into an influential dialogue model that prescribes things like how to:

- plan to influence
- manage the visible aspects of the dialogue such as seating arrangements and what physical posture to adopt
- set context
- ask insightful questions
- organize ideas so they come out logically and attractively
- respond to counter-arguments, if they arise
- seek commitment

Influence is indeed now a common learning topic, but it is not easy to teach. It is challenging for two main reasons: the topic of influence is loaded with psycho-socio-ethical issues; and, influence skills are very difficult to master. Let’s explore each of these reasons.

PSYCHO-SOCIO-ETHICAL ISSUES

Resistance to learning how to influence others is not uncommon. The list of concerns ranges from how influencing people simply “feels like work”, to how impinging on the personal space of others is inappropriate, to the misperception that all influencing is *indirect* and involves some kind of ulterior motive. A learning environment intended to develop influence skills, particularly with learners who are historically “influence-reluctant,” needs to address these concerns head-on.

The good news is that high integrity influence is not about pushiness, manipulation, and deception; it’s about assertiveness, authenticity, listening, proposing, and solving. Even *indirect* influence tactics, when they are offered with a “pure” motive (that is, when they involve statements that are genuinely felt or believed), will be recognized, even by the most stubborn learner, as okay to employ. People tend to relax when they learn they can “sell” with honesty (making this point is “influential!”).

INFLUENCE EXCELLENCE IS DIFFICULT

It’s also challenging to teach influence because genuine, high-integrity influence is a diverse, nuanced topic that rubs noses with millennia-old matters of human trust, charisma, and character. *Direct* and *indirect* influence tactics are just that—tactics, the things you *do* or say in order to be influential. And to effectively make your pitch in that room next door you will need those skills.

But the other ingredient for successful influence is self-management—the ability to manage your own attitude so that you can *be* influential. Such skills are the magic of “influentiality” (a HORN term meaning the ability to be influential). This is what it takes to be special.

Back to that room next door where you will do your thing: What if the person who came before you was asking for the same thing? Maybe the situation is such that two families are asking that principal for the *one* available space in that different class. What if I am competing with another firm in my pitch to my prospective client? It’s how we “show up” in the influence conversation that will make the difference.

As influencers we must configure our brain for the influence situation. People seeking to influence benefit from learning to *be* influential.

BEING INFLUENTIAL

After all, influencing someone does involve bringing oneself to bear, and that’s usually half the battle; getting the person responsible for influencing to actually step up to the plate and assert his or her will can be tricky, regardless of how clearly tactics are explained, demonstrated, and practiced. It’s not unusual for a person learning to influence to have to

confront unspoken fears, or embrace the possibility of failure, or carve out the time from other matters, or shift their habitual orientation from a place of negativity to one of self-produced hope. Indeed, sometimes an alleged moral reluctance to develop influence skills is actually a red herring, hiding a general disinclination to assert oneself.

Even with such obstacles out of the way, how does one think like an influential person? Let's scratch the surface of that tough question. Two well-researched ideas readily come up: empathy and agency (though there are plenty of others^v).

EMPATHY

Empathy has been trumpeted as critical for effective influence for over 2000 years. It was at that time when Cicero, the famed Roman statesman offered: "If you wish to persuade me, you must think my thoughts, feel my feelings, and speak my words." Those simple-sounding directions are great examples of things that are much "easier said than done." What most of us experience when we try to listen to others is a cacophony of other voices in our head—we judge whether we like what we are hearing, we plan what we are going to say next, we consider the consequences of the conversational path, we defend ourselves in our own mind. Instead, people can learn to direct their attention to how they would feel in the same circumstances as the person being influenced and thereby improve their ability to connect with that person^{vi}.

AGENCY

Another example of self-management that a person can self-nurture in order to maximize their influentiaity is what HORN calls "agency"—a composite of independently and well-researched human tendencies that add up to being positive, action-oriented, persistent, and inclined to take full responsibility for the influencing interaction's outcome.^{vii}

Agency is very influential because people buy-into the ideas of positive, action-oriented, personally responsible people. For example, influencers who do not feel fully responsible tend to engage in silent mental chatter about other pursuits; about how "it doesn't matter anyway", about how loose ends are unlikely to make the difference, and about escape from blame. This negative self-talk, which often reveals self-doubt and/or blaming others, diminishes the likelihood of successful influencing and can be self-managed during an influencing interaction.^{viii}

GO FOR IT!

Indeed, how well you do in that room next door depends on plenty of things. You have a plan for how you will handle the dialogue as a whole, including what exactly it is you are proposing, what questions you will ask, what resistance you likely will get, and how you will respond to that

resistance. And you've got sound reasons (direct tactics) for why the person should say 'yes'. You have oriented yourself around that person's point of view (empathy), and got it into your head that you need to be authentic so that the things you say will move the person (indirect tactics). You've practiced the skill of keeping your attitude positive and responsible so that you will be persistent.

High integrity influence is learnable...Practice makes perfect.

ⁱ (Penguin, 2012),

ⁱⁱ www.csls.ca/reports/ProdServiceIndustries.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://english.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/influence>

^{iv} Cialdini

^v Cuddy

^{vi} Rogers

^{vii} Bandura

^{viii} (Ellis, Harper).

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