Influencing: The key to successful business relationships

In business, a high proportion of your working day is spent relating to other people – as a leader you need to focus as much on communicating, creating and developing effective working relationships, as you do on the functional aspects of your job. Fiona Dent and Mike Brent describe a range of tools and techniques to make you more effective in this crucial skill of influencing.

Introduction

Relationships are the bedrock of human existence – as humans we are the most social species after ants, termites and bees! We are social and political animals with an independent and an interdependent sense of identity. We are our relationships and the quality of our lives is a function of our relationships. As a leader and manager you need to focus as much on influencing, communicating, creating and developing effective working relationships, as you do on the technical or functional aspect of your job. So, whatever you do, whatever your level, and in whatever organisation, relationships matter for your effectiveness, reputation and success. You simply cannot be an effective leader or manager if you cannot effectively relate to and influence others.

An important part of any working relationship is how you go about getting commitment and buy in from others to do the things that need to be done. There has been a general
shift from leadership by command and control to leadership through commitment and engagement. So, in this new way of working:

- How do you secure agreement from others?
- How do you get buy in to a project?
- How do you persuade and convince others?

Engaging with others, gaining commitment and influencing starts with the quality of the relationship which will undoubtedly affect your success as a leader or manager.

Based on our experience of working with thousands of business leaders and managers, we have developed a range of models, tools and techniques which are designed to help you become more effective in this crucial business skill. These are summarised in this article, and discussed in detail in our recently published book – The Leader's Guide To Influence: How to use soft skills to get hard results.

The relationship model

Effective leaders understand that it is important to reflect on the quality of all your relationships, and to use the information effectively. We have created the following model to help you do this (Fig 1). The model enables you to assess each relationship based on its value to you for work reasons and for sociability reasons. Thinking about relationships in this context will help you to:

- Understand more about each relationship - why some are easy, difficult, challenging, frustrating, etc
- Reflect about your motivations for each relationship
- Assess the value of each relationship to you personally and for business related reasons.

The features of each category are as follows:

- Casual relationship - where there is a low work need and a low sociability need; a relationship that is not essential to core activities and is therefore a relationship that is peripheral and superficial. A relationship that is:
  - non essential
  - with a person you have little contact with
  - with a person you know very little about
  - with a person for whom you have neutral feelings

- with someone you are aware of but don’t have much contact with
- superficial.

For example

Every morning and evening when you arrive and leave the office you chat and say good morning and pass the time of day with the security staff, perhaps chatting about their recent holiday or what they did at the weekend or previous evening. So, you are friendly to these people but they are low on both your work and sociability need scales - a casual relationship.
• Social relationship – where there is a low work need and a high sociability need; where the main motivation for the relationship is an emotional connection which leads to friendliness. A relationship that is:
  • non essential
  • a person you choose to socialise with at work, perhaps having lunch with them
  • a person you share ideas with and trust and respect
  • a person who knows about you and you know about them at a more personal level
  • a person you choose to spend time with.

For example
Most of us have at least one person at work that we confide in – often this person isn’t in our work group nor are they crucial to work but rather someone with whom you have built a trusting relationship, whose opinions matter to you and whose company you enjoy – a social relationship.

• Transactional relationship – where there is high work need and low sociability need; those professional relationships necessary to get a job done. A relationship that is:
  • essential for work
  • with a person you would not naturally choose to spend time with other than for work reasons
  • with someone you know little about but need to get the job done
  • with someone you don’t really feel strongly about
  • with a person you know will be able to help you in your current role or project.

For example
This is the person you know is crucial for getting your work done and someone you find difficult to relate to, so there is no other reason for the relationship to exist other than for job related reasons – a transactional relationship.

• Mutually dependent relationship – where there is high work need and high sociability need; where there is a balance of need from both a work and a social perspective. A relationship that is:
  • based on mutual support and friendship
  • with a person you know well and respect
  • with someone you enjoy being with and is central to you getting the job done
  • with someone who you enjoy sharing ideas, knowledge and experience with.

For example
The person you know you want to have in your project team – you enjoy their company and you know they do a great job; possibly even more than this you make a good team – a mutually dependent relationship.

Influential and relationally intelligent leaders recognise that they will have work based relationships in all four categories; the important thing is to recognise which category each person falls into, and if it is appropriate for that particular person. If not then you may have to invest some time and energy into developing the relationship further to ensure you are getting the best from it.

In addition to understanding the quality and basis of your relationships, a key factor for understanding and developing influential relationships is having an appreciation of your relationship style. Most of you have a preferred way of working with others. This is based on your habitual behaviour and comes about because you have found that certain approaches, behaviours, and skills seem to work for you when interacting with others.
No one style is best or worst, each style is simply different and each has its own positive and negative aspects. Your preferred style will have an effect upon the way you relate to others, how you are perceived by others and how others relate to you.

Our approach is based on a two dimensional model, where each of your preferences plays a role in the way you relate to people. (Fig 2). The preferences are:

- Are you more outgoing or more reserved?
- Are you more person focused or more job focused?

Your positioning on these preferences then translates into your relationship style.

For example Jack is the Financial Director of a major international insurance company. He attended one of our recent programmes where we discussed the relationship style questionnaire. He found that his preferred relationship style is “realist” and he told us that he tended to use this style with all his colleagues and had wondered why this worked well with some people but not with others.

He had a challenging relationship with one of his direct reports, Tony, who wanted to adopt a more sociable approach where he chatted about non-work issues. Jack saw this as irrelevant and time wasting and became more and more frustrated.
Reflecting on this model, Jack realised that Tony tended towards a more sociable/harmonising style and therefore had different relationship needs to Jack. Following this realisation, Jack worked hard to adapt, and flex his style to accommodate Tony’s preference. This improved the relationship to such an extent that Jack and Tony now have a much more productive relationship.

Impression management and personal brand

Another area of relationship management that is often overlooked yet hugely important for how you set about creating and developing effective relationships is what we term impression management. We often talk about first impressions and the importance of these for success in any interactive situation. What has become clear through our research is that the impact you have on, and the impression you create with, other people can make or break a relationship. So, what is impression management? Quite simply it is the effect you have on others and the feelings you leave them with when you have been interacting with them in any situation. Getting it right is about ensuring you give yourself the best possible opportunity to create a positive and lasting impression. Becoming more aware of the image you are portraying to others is a key element of impression management. So, like it or not, impression is based on the initial impact you make and then the subsequent feeling that you leave others with each time you interact with them. Image and impression management are vital in order to create and maintain effective influencing relationships.

When you meet someone for the first time, or enter into a dialogue with a person you don’t know very well, you typically ask yourself a range of questions:

- What do I think/feel about this person?
- Do I like this person?
- Can I work with this person?
- Do I trust this person?
- Do I respect this person?
- Do I care what this person thinks about me?

This isn’t necessarily a conscious process; you ask yourself these questions in your mind in order to assess your views about another person to determine how you will react to them, and whether or not you wish to develop a relationship with them.

The implications are that each and every one of you must be aware and take care to create and develop a positive impression on others. Remember your reputation is created by other people’s impression of you. Creating and developing the right impression is one of the first opportunities you have to begin a relationship with another person. Get this right and you are off to a flying start; misjudge and get it wrong and you will have much work to do to get it back onto track (Fig 3).

The first things you notice when interacting with someone are:

Visual impression – which is based on the things you notice about the person and the details and specifics you become aware of, observe and take in. For example:

- Clothes
- Grooming
- The way you carry yourself
- Facial expression.

This then leaves you with thoughts, feelings and reactions to the person which lead to you forming either a positive or negative impression of the person.

Body language – is the rich combination of body posture, gestures, facial expression and eye contact. It is also how you as an individual express these when interacting with others.
Vocal usage - the way you use your voice - accent, pace, tone, pause, pitch, rhythm and emphasis and its effect on others.
Language - the words you use must be clear, appropriate, direct, descriptive and relevant.

How you use your body language, vocal usage and language when interacting and engaging with others can either support or negate the message you are trying to convey. In particular it is important to convey congruence between all three by matching to ensure that your language, body language and vocal usage are all in tune and conveying the same message. (For more detail on this topic see for example Pease B. and A.2).

All of this leads to an impact being made which is the first impression you leave people with and may lead to rapport being developed. This encourages interest to be generated which can lead to liking being developed.

For example
You are chairing a meeting with some clients; you have arrived early and are already in the room setting things up. The clients begin to arrive and you are ready to greet and acknowledge them but as they walk in they systematically ignore you, continue their conversations and don’t offer a handshake or a “Good Morning”. How do you feel? What opinion are you now forming of these clients?

This happened to a consultant friend of ours recently. This left him wondering why he had been invited to run the meeting and furthermore left him with an extremely negative perception of the participants, which in turn negatively affected the process and outcome of the meeting.
For the clients to create a better impression, all they had to do was simply greet the consultant, shake hands and introduce themselves and things would have been more positive.

Or of course the consultant could have taken the initiative and approached them discreetly and introduced himself and welcomed them to the meeting.

Influencing: Tips and techniques

Managers need to focus on a number of tools, techniques and behaviours in order to improve their influencing and become more effective managers. Three of the most useful tools are:

- Framing and reframing
- Appreciation
- Language.

Framing and reframing

Reframing is when you change the context or perspective of how a situation is viewed, with the intent of enabling people to view that situation in a more useful and productive way.

Think about how you normally frame your arguments. Whose perspective are you likely to be using? Naturally we tend to see things from our own perspective rather than thinking about how the other person views it.

So we need to listen carefully to others and frame any arguments to make them meaningful to others. That means that we also should be capable of reframing any existing argument – and adapting it to make sense to the person you are trying to influence. The way you act towards a person or a situation depends on how you frame that person or situation.

For example, if you frame someone as a problem performer (which we often hear in our work with managers) and focus only on when they are being a problem, you will not be able to see anything other than problems. So it is helpful then to ask yourself some specific questions about this person in order to identify when they are not being a problem. In other words, you are reframing the situation from negative to positive. You can try to focus on times when they have demonstrated ambition or initiative. You can actively look for times when they have been helpful or have been successful or when they have shown creativity or support. It is unlikely that someone is a problem all of the time in everything they do, so explore and actively look for positives before rushing to judgement.

Taking an appreciative approach

There are two key behaviours which summarise this approach:

- Inquire more than you advocate. This means that you need to be asking more questions and doing more listening rather than simply telling people what to do.
- Be more appreciative than negative in your interactions. For really effective relationships the ratio of positivity to negativity has to be five to one!

To develop and demonstrate your skills and abilities in this area you should:

- Start noticing small things that people are doing well and compliment them
- Start to say the positive and appreciative things you notice about others to your colleagues
- Think about your own behaviour and the balance of positive versus negative
- Set yourself a challenge to say at least three positive and appreciative pieces of feedback every day.

(See also Cooperider D. and Whitney D. 1).

For example

Hans is the CEO of a small manufacturing company. He has a fraught relationship with his personal assistant whom he finds fussy, annoying and exasperating. The relationship has become progressively worse over a period of time which led to the PA becoming unproductive. Hans’ way of dealing with this was to focus on all the things that annoyed him and unsurprisingly this led to an even worse situation to the extent that the relationship was really beginning to break down.

Hans discussed this issue with us and we suggested that he try taking an appreciative approach rather than focusing on the negative. We helped Hans to develop a plan of action. This involved getting him to identify the positive aspects of her performance which he had previously ignored. Following a period of time where Hans applied this process, he found that his PA became much more motivated – she does more of what she already did well and is more receptive to developing her weaker areas. On the whole their relationship has improved dramatically and has become significantly more productive.

Hans has told us that this experience has taught him that you can turn round a difficult relationship and that appreciative principles actually do work.

Using influential language

There are many different aspects of language used in our conversations with people in business. We would like to focus on two types of language which we find used frequently when influencing - logical language and empathetic language.

- Logical language - This is the language of logic and analysis, of facts and figures, of detail, proofs, structure and graphs. It's clear, analytical, formal and unemotional. It is a common language among leaders and managers and is necessary and useful for influencing success. However, some managers can fall in to the trap of overusing it. Facts alone are not sufficient to convince everyone, nor do facts always create effective relations. The major drawback here is not so much the logic itself as the accompanying lack of emotion which leads to people giving the impression that they are not taking
other people’s feelings and emotions into account. In relational influencing it is important to get the balance right in order to reach effective outcomes.

- Empathetic language - We would recommend that specialists add empathetic language to their repertoire. It is question based rather than directive, so this implies that rather than focusing solely on processes and logic, it is also beneficial to focus on understanding people’s concerns, feelings and fears and consider their possible reactions.

If you are a manager in a sector/industry where there is a preference for using strong and logical language, you will probably need to become more skilled in using empathetic language. As we have said in our introduction, people are relational creatures and need to be listened to and involved in order to feel that their ideas are valued.

On the other hand, if you consistently use empathetic language, there will be times when this too is counterproductive. There are situations where you should try to use stronger and more direct language, for example, when you are in a pressurised situation and a decision is required, when you are regarded as the expert and others are looking to you for guidance and direction.

Conclusion

Here are some top tips for improving your relational influencing:
- Admit mistakes
- Be flexible
- Observe and read the other person
- Manage your own emotions
- Be open to challenge
- Don’t judge other people – remain neutral
- Listen and listen again
- Show appreciation and thank people
- Recognise people’s efforts and contribution
- Enthuse your people
- Be fair
- Stay connected with your people.

References


Further reading


