

Influencing Upwards

Your ability to influence upwards is one of the strongest factors affecting your overall success as a leader of organisation performance or change. Business moves quickly, you may not be in the same place as your boss or the senior stakeholders you are trying to influence, and if you are it will probably be a challenge to get time in their diary, let alone a chance to influence them.

“That’s life.....” as the song goes! As an influencer you’ll increase your chances of success if you intervene where you can have the most impact. There are some common hurdles people face described below, followed by some top tips to address them.

Common Pitfalls

It’s good to begin with what you are in control of when preparing to influence your boss or someone more senior to you. In many cases the problem “begins at home”; we either make things up, or we miss things!

- **We assume we will not succeed** – it is common to imagine a failed attempt before we begin, or to assume because of a previously unsuccessful attempt, a similar outcome. This can have a negative effect on our sense of power and makes it more likely that we will fail or even avoid the situation altogether.
- **We make a more senior person into something negative in our minds** - It is human when stressed or anxious to focus on negatives rather than positives. In the case of our boss we may see only their negative traits, or make a big deal out of a small incident. This can lead to performance nerves, forgetting important information or providing too much detail and losing their attention.
- **Not preparing your facts properly** – senior people are usually under a lot of pressure and won’t have much available time. If you are not clear about your facts, your objective and any other stakeholders who may be affected, you are much less likely to succeed.

Top Tips

- Stick with the reality and pare things back to what you know and don’t know. In most influence situations you don’t know the outcome until you try. Run your situation and approach past someone who can give you an objective view.
- Ask yourself some questions that help you to see the world from their perspective and shape your influence attempt accordingly.
 - What is important to them?
 - What are the pressures they are facing?
 - What are their priorities?
 - What are their objectives?
 - What might they want from you?
 - How could you add value to them?
 - How do they like to be influenced?

- Be solution focussed, not problem stating. Senior people are busy, they have a lot on and they like people who get on with things. Make life easy for them, and suggest an action or direction.
- Wherever possible, express statements positively rather than negatively. State what you can do or point to the opportunities. Research shows that people are more likely to be influenced by what is possible than by what gets in the way.
- Think about how you could make their job easy. How can you be of service to them and get what you need at the same time?
- Adapt your presentation style to them. If they are fast paced, make quick decisions and become irritable with too much detail, then make sure you are also fast paced, concise and stick to an overview and relevant facts.
- Consider your target's influence style – do they use more push or pull; which behaviours do they tend to favour? Paying attention to this information and adapting your influence style will give you the best chance of acceptance. Remember how they treat others might differ from how they like to be influenced.
- Think about their overall responsibilities. Are there aspects of their world which you will need to acknowledge in order to win their agreement? Might you need to adjust your objective to take account of a conflicting agenda?
- Is it possible that what you are aiming for is not important to them, or maybe they don't agree with your approach and haven't had time to tell you? You may need to do some listening and/or deepening your understanding in order to check this out.
- Do you know people who are close to this person or who have successfully influenced them? Spend time with them and get their views/advice.
- Consider building allies before you go into a meeting with senior stakeholders. Ask yourself:
 - Who do they listen to?
 - Who are they likely to be swayed or reassured by?
 - Whose view or support will they be looking for?
- There may be other people in the same reporting line as you, or from other areas that you need to consider in order to make a convincing case. If there are multiple stakeholders do a stakeholder map, or a stakeholder analysis, to identify possible conflicts or different levels of openness to your aim. This will help you to identify tactical steps that may be necessary to influence effectively.
- Use the Influencing Planning Process and the stakeholder mapping to help you clarify some of their issues/ concerns and to target your messages better. Rehearse with a trusted colleague for really important situations.

References

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