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Influencing skills: a how-to guide, or, How to get what you want without making enemies



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Influencing others and negotiating for what you need are vital components of the information professional's toolbox. Following a series of workshops on negotiating and influencing skills which I was involved in delivering at various conferences and universities a few years ago, I've become much more aware of the value of these skills in action. As a lifelong people-watcher, I find it fascinating to have an insight into the reasons behind the success, or otherwise, of someone's tactics and the vital messages they communicate by what they say and how they say it. I've enjoyed working out how to deploy the skills myself and have sharpened my awareness of the effect the techniques have on what I'm trying to achieve. This article will introduce these influencing skills, identify when they're used and why they're important and share some ideas of useful approaches and phrases.

WHY INFLUENCING?

When we are persuading someone of something – whether bidding for resources, gaining support for a policy, creating a positive working relationship or winning respect from colleagues and customers – we are using our influencing skills. In the world of matrix management, flatter structures, project working and interprofessional multidisciplinary services, we often find ourselves needing to get something from those we don't manage, and who perhaps don't seem to think like we do. The more democratic and participative style of management we use today changes the dynamics of relationships at work. Sometimes

the most influential person in an organisation isn't the one at the top – it's the one who knows how to influence the one at the top (or the one with the money). There are professional influencers such as sales people or media spin-doctors – but librarians would run them pretty close in the complex liaison and advocacy roles we carry out.

SO WHAT IS INFLUENCING?

A dictionary definition suggests that it is when we change someone's views, attitudes, decisions, perceptions or beliefs to produce an effect on them – in a positive way. It involves adapting your words and behaviour subtly through an awareness of the effect you are having on someone else. So it is about reading and understanding yourself and other people. Through these skills you can move things forward and gain agreement or change someone's mind and, importantly, you can achieve this without pushing, forcing or telling them what to do. It involves relationships with staff, colleagues, your manager and your customers, and is an indispensable tool for the information professional. In short, it is applied common sense blended with high-level communication skills and a subtle gameplan.

FOUR INFLUENCING SKILLS

I'm going to introduce you to four influencing skills, which are largely based on ideas from the excellent and accessible books and articles of Terry Gillen, listed below. To some extent, influencing skills are just applied interpersonal and communication skills, so none of these is likely to be new to you, but this may help you to see them in a new light.

Skill 1. Probing and listening

Active listening and asking probing questions are classic communication skills, featuring in areas such as interviewing and appraisal and, of course, the reference interview. They are about involving a person in the discussion, encouraging them to think through the rationale you are presenting and thinking through what it means for them. And the more you listen, the more likely it is that the other person will listen to you.

If you ask someone a question, you're pretty likely to get an answer, so try and make much of your conversation: asking rather than telling. This creates a subtle shift in the balance of the discussion and involves the other person much more as an active participant. They are more likely to feel comfortable with a conversation in which they are

playing a major part. It also gives you more control of the pace and direction, and of valuable thinking time, since we can all think faster than we can talk.

Ask open questions for exploring the other person's thinking (e.g. *How do you feel about that suggestion?*) and closed questions for checking facts and understanding (e.g. *Have I explained that clearly enough?*). Listen actively and ask reflective questions that echo back your understanding of what you've heard, to check your understanding (e.g. *You're in two minds about this?*). If they disagree with you, resist the temptation to argue back, and ask questions to understand better their point of view. If there is an objection, you'd better hear it if you're going to get past it. You will gain a good feel for how they are thinking, so that you can put your ideas in a way that they might find acceptable.

Skill 2. Building rapport

This is about getting on the same wavelength as the other person, and gearing your pace and timing to theirs. If you articulate clearly the direction in which you are taking the conversation, you will keep them on board and save them some of the trouble of working out what you mean. For example, imagine that you are discussing with a member of staff why their interaction with an academic colleague went badly wrong and resulted in a complaint. How might you build and maintain rapport so that the conversation achieves a positive outcome?

Signposting is a technique you may use subconsciously, but it is very effective when used tactically in a number of ways:

- To state clearly the intention of what you are about to say, so that they are prepared for it, and to help them focus on your meaning (e.g. *Let me put a suggestion to you or I'm going to play devil's advocate ...*). This attracts their attention and makes them receptive to considering what they think about it.
- To soften the introduction of difficult subjects, showing that you recognise that something is sensitive and you respect how they may feel about it (e.g. *There's a tricky matter I'd like to talk to you about*).
- To provide a kind of commentary to the discussion, adding a description of how it is going (e.g. *Let's just see if I understand your perspective on what happened*).

Pacing involves assessing the rate of your progress by checking the other person's understanding. This may be by using the questioning techniques

described earlier, or through summarising where you feel you've got to. This will check that they have understood, whilst also reinforcing common ground and areas of agreement by repeating them. It's no use trying to push someone along at your mental pace. You already understand what you're trying to get across but they don't, and you'll just leave them behind, all bewildered. If you're enthusiastic about something or you're under pressure to get an agreement, it's very easy to race ahead – in the example above, there is no point in rushing to get the staff member to admit that the conversation with the academic member of staff went wrong from the outset. Pull too hard and the thread of understanding between you will snap. Success lies in convincing them of your points by supporting them to think through the arguments for themselves. What did they intend to achieve? How might the conversation have gone better? What steps might they have taken to reach agreement with the academic? That isn't something you can just tell them. Remember to check how their understanding is progressing, and avoid breaking the rapport by making them feel either rushed or cornered.

Your choice of language is also very important. Negative or overly formal language will affect the tone of the discussion and disturb the rapport you are aiming for. It is always possible to say 'and' rather than 'but' to move the topic on from areas of difference and avoid such a negative full-stop. 'Parental' words such as 'should' and 'ought' annoy people, as no one likes being told what they should think or do.

Skill 3. Selling

Selling has become a somewhat uncomfortable word, but influencing uses very similar principles. Salespeople have a reputation for getting you to buy something you don't want, but really they are trying to persuade you of the link between their product and your needs, that is, to influence you to buy it. The tactics are to find out what is important to the other person and gear your discussion to the things that will attract them and serve their needs.

An example would be the perennial effort to persuade a course leader to include information skills in their programme. It is obvious to you why this would be a good idea, what benefits it will bring the students and the strategic objectives it will fulfil, but just because librarians see it, it doesn't mean that all academic staff do. Rehearsing the features of information literacy as a graduate skill and the need to include these skills in assessments

may not be of much interest to the course leader, but by asking and listening you may find out that he's under pressure to introduce more e-learning into the course, and you happen to have some information skills materials ready to customise for this subject. His external examiner report may suggest that the students need more help avoiding plagiarism, and you may have a session prepared that includes this with information skills development. The virtues of producing an information-literate graduate may not be enough to convince everyone, so in this case the focus has moved to what the course leader needed to 'buy' to solve his current problems. After all, no one wants to buy double-glazing because they want new windows (the features) – what they actually want is to keep the warmth in and the noise out (the benefits).

Skill 4. Assertiveness

Sometimes assertiveness is seen as almost synonymous with aggression but, in the positive sense in which we might use it in the workplace, it is controlled behaviour that is planned and well-thought-out to lead to the outcome you want. Assertiveness skills boost persuasiveness and enhance influence. Our personality style and characteristic thoughts and beliefs may sometimes lead us to react in negative or defensive ways when confronted with certain situations, and assertiveness is about overcoming these automatic responses and behaving according to the plan.

It means being straightforward and clear about what you want to say, always keeping to the point and being succinct. Leave out the padding and make sure everything is relevant to the position you're trying to put across. When things get difficult, an approach such as the 'broken record' technique of repeating a point several times, with a little variation, will allow you to keep focused and calm. It will also protect you against being put off course by use of emotional pressure or manipulation, as you can just keep coming back to your point in a neutral way.

Equally, it is helpful to think about the other person's behaviour (what you actually see and hear) rather than any personality traits, attitudes or assumptions you think they may have (what you think it means). Assertiveness is based on characteristics we value in others – being straightforward and tolerant – so it is likely that people will appreciate these in us too, and listen with increased trust.

AN 'INFLUENCING' PHRASE BOOK

Finally, here are some useful phrases and techniques to try out:¹

Influencing principles:

- 'How do you feel about that suggestion?', 'What are your concerns about it?', 'Help me understand how that presents a problem for you.'
- Don't use 'irritators', such as 'with respect', 'I hear what you say', 'let's be realistic' and 'I'm being perfectly reasonable.' They all convey the exact opposite.
- Agree whenever you can. It is hard to attack someone who agrees with you.

Making a start

- 'What issues do you think we should consider in deciding this?', 'Let's pick this suggestion apart', 'How do you think we can move forward on this?', 'What would be the effect if you ...?', 'Let's think through how we could make it work.'
- Focus on common ground to begin with. Resist the temptation to go straight to any areas of difference.
- Make it easy to say yes. Make it hard to say no.

Buy yourself thinking time

- 'You've given me a lot to take in here. Do you mind giving me some time to think it through?'
- 'Let me make sure I understand what you're saying.'
- 'Explain to me again how you would see the plan working.'

Dealing with disagreement

- Don't say 'but'; say 'and'. Present your views as an addition to, rather than a contradiction of, the other person's.
- Disagreeing with someone produces a 60% chance that they will disagree back.
- Ask for clarification, seek ideas, make suggestions. Don't state objections.
- Your worst enemy is your own quick reaction.

Difficult and sensitive situations

- Name the emotion – ‘I can see you’re angry’, ‘It’s not worth getting upset.’
- Make ‘I’ statements, rather than ‘you’ statements: ‘I feel let down’ rather than ‘You let me down’; ‘I feel uncomfortable when you speak to me like that’; ‘It concerns me that you feel that way.’
- ‘There’s something I’d like to discuss with you. It’s a bit sensitive, so may I just describe how it looks to me?’

GIVE IT A GO

I hope you find these skills and ideas useful in your day-to-day work. The next time you’re in a meeting, make a mental note of the techniques you see other people using to get their points across and to deal with disagreement. And, most importantly, when you next need to influence a colleague or customer, or your manager, jot down some ideas about how you’re going to approach it and some helpful phrases – and make a plan. Good luck!

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NOTE

- 1 Adapted from R. Fisher and W. Ury, *Getting to yes: negotiating an agreement without giving in*, 2nd edn, London: Arrow, 1997, and Gillen, 1999.