

Stop telling and start influencing

By Geoff Kelly

Right now in hundreds of locations around the world people are saying no to products and ideas that they need. Management teams are failing to grasp presentations on ideas and initiatives important to the future of their organisations. Prospects are rejecting sales pitches for products and services that are right for them. And project leaders, chief executives, professional practice leaders and salespeople are frustrated by their failure to win hearts and minds to their mutual benefit.

Influence is the key to success for today's managers, leaders and organisations. Today's managers and leaders need to earn the support of people both inside and outside the organisation, whether they are staff, customers, suppliers, regulators, financiers, or community groups.

Yet, few do it well. Some provide more information to an already information-overloaded audience, forgetting that they work in the most over-communicated society in history. Others are disappointed when a purely rational appeal fails to arouse anyone to take action. The information and rational appeal strategies that most people rely on to influence others simply don't work.

This has caused failure in careers, worthwhile ideas, valuable projects and even for entire organisations. Every day news media carry the epitaphs of organisations and leaders who could not meet this critical test.

Use influence to boost your success

The ability to persuade and sell ideas is today's most important individual and organisational competence. The good news is that it is learnable, and those who learn it have a crucial advantage over those who don't.

Those who master it do more, and rise to the top of their organisations. And their organisations prosper. Leading executives, salespeople, professionals, politicians, soldiers and clergy know how to win hearts and minds to their ideas and causes. Others languish as less talented people eat their lunch.

Leading, at any level, is about seeing what is needed and inspiring others to take action to achieve change. Leadership is about ideas; how relevant and compelling they are to the led, and who adopts and acts on them.

Imagine the difference to you and your organisation if you can get peers, executive committees, clients, partners, suppliers, government regulators and others to say yes to you seven times out of ten rather than three out of ten. How much more would you achieve in your work and your life? What increase would you see in your income? How many more people would see you as a leader in your field?

Imagine how you could better leverage the support of others and achieve not just compliance, but wholehearted commitment to your ideas.

How do you unlock this support?

There are five things you can do to increase massively your influence in all situations:

1. Make it all about them and the issues that affect them, not all about you or your organisation
2. Identify and convert credible third parties to whom your targets will turn to confirm their judgments
3. Understand and use the principles of influence
4. Help others to decide for themselves your main ideas
5. Build your influence attempts around a structure that reflects the way people think

Before we describe each approach, you need to understand there are no silver bullets and nothing works 100 per cent of the time. However, consistent use of these approaches will significantly increase your success rate. Also, ethical use of these approaches needs us to be sure that successfully influencing another to take a course of action will be not only in our interests, but also for the other party. A good test question for your self is this: “If they were aware of what I’m trying to achieve with them, would they approve?” If your answer to this is no, then you should review your motives and approach.

1. Make it all about them

Make it all about your influence targets and the issues that affect them, not all about you, your processes or the nature of your organisation.

How many times have you heard someone say they needed to “educate” their staff, customers or “the public” about what their organisation had to offer? Do you recall how fascinated you were with the last time you picked up someone else’s brochure that described their organisation’s history, people, processes and achievements? When you met someone at a recent networking event and they told you about themselves, their job and their organisation, did you feel your attention switch-off?

The important point here is that people are mostly interested in themselves and whatever can improve their current or future well-being. Period. Most attempts to influence fall at this first hurdle when people are so locked into their own perspective that they come across to others as self-centred.

Whenever you want them to listen to and consider a proposition, put it in terms that will interest and relate to them. For example, if you want them to read that brochure, take out as many references to I, we and your organisation’s name, and replace them with the word “you.” Then restructure each sentence to make each point so it clearly relates to them.

Master sculptor Michelangelo once said “If you want to see the detail, shift the light.” In the same way, influencers need to “shift the light” on any issue to the perspective of their targets. Two good questions you can use to do this are:

- What are the benefits in my target’s terms of what I propose?
- How will they take advantage of and experience these benefits?

Of course, to get the best value from these questions you first have to understand your targets. The better you understand them and their needs, the stronger your platform for influencing them.

2. Identify and convert credible third parties

Rather than simply focus on making promises and keeping them, which is now a given, also identify and convert credible third parties to whom your targets will turn to confirm their judgments

Most decisions are so complex that people don’t trust themselves to get it right without expert advice of some kind. This is particularly so when they have no direct experience on which to rely. For example, when buying a car you haven’t owned before, or hiring a consultant in a field new to you.

Ask yourself:

- Whose opinions will they or could they turn to and rely on this matter?
- Whose expertise or experience could I make available to them to help them take the view or action I’m suggesting?

Then you can map your target’s network to identify people they are likely to consult. This network becomes an important target for your influence efforts.

3. Understand and use the principles of influence

You will increase your influence skills and results when you understand and use the principles of influence. Researchers have identified many useful principles, but 10 to 12 have proven most powerful. These include the principles of social proof, consistency, scarcity, expectation, involvement, reciprocation, association and esteem.

Let’s look at just one, the principle of scarcity.

Scarcity, sometimes called the principle of urgency, is useful in both increasing the perceived value of a product, service or idea, and in moving people to action. Social researchers have found that people are more concerned by the possible loss of something than the potential gain of something of equivalent value. The more something is restricted, the more we want it.

For example, the long lines of people waiting to enter some nightclubs increases the desirability of those places, not make them less attractive. Similarly, the closing-down sale drives customers to retail stores that they previously have not patronised, largely because the opportunity is soon to be lost. When the car dealer says she has only one model left in that colour, and doesn't know if there will be another one, it increases the perceived value and urgency of the purchase. And when a conference organiser says that only the first 30 people to register will get the early bird price and discounted room rate, he is using this principle to drive early action.

If you have genuine scarcity you can use to influence an outcome, ask yourself the following question:

- What limited numbers, access or time can I state in this situation?
- What is the potential loss that my target could experience if they don't take the desired action?

4. Help others to decide for themselves

People usually commit more to their own ideas than someone else's. Two powerful influencing techniques you can use to help others decide for themselves are questions and stories.

When you ask a question, it engages the other person because it requires them to answer. Salespeople use this technique when they ask a prospect a series of questions that lead them from their general desires to decide the specific product fully satisfies what they have been looking for. If done with subtlety, you can use this technique for many purposes.

For example, you may want a colleague to decide that you both have a stake in the success of one of your core projects. You could first ask what the colleague is seeking to achieve in their own role, and then ask the conditions they will need for that success. With a series of planned questions, you can lead them to suggest that by supporting your project, you will both achieve your goals faster.

Stories are all around us in business. We see them in speeches, change programmes, selling and at the water-cooler. They capture attention because from mother's knee we have been conditioned to listen and learn from stories. Although they have other purposes, such as to attract attention or make a complex subject more understandable, here we will focus on the story that influences.

The story that influences gives enough detail to paint a picture, but leaves enough room so the listener can relate it to his or her circumstances.

For example, a retail client was struggling to get store managers to own and drive a major customer service initiative through the business. Then a manager faced a situation where his store had created much upset and embarrassment for a customer.

The store had left a security dye canister attached to a garment and it subsequently exploded over the walls of her kitchen. The manager first addressed the urgent needs of the customer in arranging a replacement garment for an important event by sending a tailor to her home for custom fitting. He then arranged for cleaners and painters to fix her kitchen, all the while believing he would be sacked for spending so much of the company's money on a store mistake.

Instead of disciplining the store manager or his staff, the retail CEO told this story to store managers everywhere he went in such a way that they could see their own stores going the extra mile for customers. The story was interesting and relevant, and allowed enough room for listeners to decide for themselves the meaning the CEO wanted them to accept and act on.

So, good questions to ask yourself in preparing to help your targets themselves to favourably judge matters important to you are:

- What questions or series of questions could I use to lead my targets in the direction that will most support my objectives
- What stories could I relate that would allow my targets to decide for themselves what I want them to?

5. Use powerful persuasion structures

Build your influence attempts around a structure that reflects the way people think. One good structure follows this process:

- Describe the issue or problem vividly,
- Package your idea as the solution,
- Present the losses caused by inaction and the benefits of action, and
- Describe what they need to do next.

People are so overloaded that they are unlikely to be attracted by a something even when it offers a benefit, unless the problem it solves is clearly in their minds. Too often we see the consultant or salesperson with a great service or product just right for their prospect get knocked back when they simply present the solution and its benefits. They would have done better to first discuss the issue or problem to bring the matter to the top of the prospect's mind. Only then should they present the solution in the form of the service or product they offer.

This is the same if you are trying to sell an idea or proposal to your boss or a shareholders' meeting. First paint a picture of the problem, and then package your idea as the solution. For example, if you want to convince shareholders to approve the incentive plans of senior executives, you would first paint a picture of the problem this addresses. In this case, you might show how keeping top quality executives is becoming difficult in an increasingly competitive environment for talent. Then show how your new incentive plan will encourage good people to stay and attract others who can add value to the company.

However, many would stop there and lower their chances of success. Now you must embed your position by showing how the company will benefit from keeping its talent, and how it will lose if it allows this talent to leave. Research shows the results of not taking the required action, which results in a loss of some kind, usually is more persuasive than showing the benefits of taking the action.

Again, if you stop here you won't be maximising your chances. You now need to help your target decide what to do next. For our example, it may be to vote yes by a show of hands or written ballot. You need to show specifically what they need to do next. In another example, it may be to list the three steps they need to take next, or to set a date for a meeting with other parties. This fourth step gives you the best chance to ensure that your target acts on your proposal.

To sum up, in this over-communicated society people want to be led to their benefit, but too many leaders are simply telling. The leaders in every field are effective influencers, and you can learn to be as good as or better than they are at influencing. There is a great body of scientific and street evidence about what does and doesn't work, and it is available for you to learn and use to your great benefit. If you don't, then you will allow others who do to have an enormous advantage over you in the competition for promotion, customers and leadership in any field.

Start with one or two areas and master them first. For example, pick on of the approaches above and find a simple way to use it today. For example, turn that next talk or letter into the sample influence structure covered in the last point. Or find a way to identify and use a form of scarcity to get people to come to that important meeting next week.

Geoff Kelly challenges executives and organisations who are frustrated that others don't fully commit to their ideas. He is a widely respected expert in leadership influence and he works with clients who know their success depends on earning commitment from others. Geoff can help you influence key staff, suppliers, customers and others to commit fully to your ideas and strategies.

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