

Influence Skills:

The Hidden Foundation of Effective Leadership

I would like you to stop for a moment and think about the people who have been most influential in your life or in your ministry. What made them so impactful or influential to you? Chances are that these individuals had a highly developed set of “soft skills” that they could call on when they engaged with others. It is also likely that many of these people did not have or use overt “positional power” to drive influence, but instead relied on their ability to successfully engage and communicate with others.



The fact is that effective leadership is about the effective use of influence skills. They represent the intersection of virtually all of the essential leadership characteristics and skills that you can imagine – from vision and strategic thinking to communication and interpersonal skills. The ability to successfully develop and utilize influence skills often defines the long-term success of a leader (and of a pastor). Effective influence skills often work through relationships and can take years to develop and reinforce. But they can also be lost in a second if used inappropriately or in a way that undermines the relational trust or credibility that has been developed.

“Influence” is often misconstrued to mean “power” or “manipulation”. There are several important distinctions between these concepts that are important to highlight. First, the most effective and longest-lasting type of influence relies on the use of “personal power” as opposed to “positional power”, where the source of the influence is coming from the person himself or herself as opposed to coming from the position he or she might hold.¹ This makes the focus of influence the “ability to deeply affect behaviors and beliefs” as opposed to power, which focuses on “the ability to impose your will on others.”² This also means that influence is voluntary (while power is forced), and uses conversations and interactive relationships (rather than a one-way dialogue) to gain lasting impact and alignment with others.³ Given the option of exercising power or influence in engaging others, the most effective leadership option is almost always influence. Condoleezza Rice once noted, “power is nothing unless you can turn it into influence.”

Clergy often face a unique leadership challenge relative to influence skills. Unlike a traditional business leader who can rely on stated or implied positional power, pastors need to rely far more heavily on their personal power in order to lead effectively. If we take a moment to reflect on why this might be the case, we can identify a number of factors that create this leadership environment, including: the flat organization structure of most churches; the fact that laity does not “report” to the pastor (unlike employees who “report” to their managers); the challenges of identifying and managing power dynamics within a congregation; the fact that congregants are volunteers, consumers and benefactors (very

different from the roles that secular employees typically have); and the fact that pastors are far more dependent on the current church situation (for their career and livelihood) than are individual congregants (who can relatively easily move to another congregation across town, if they so choose). Together, these unique characteristics make the influence challenges that pastors face considerably more complex than those of secular business leaders. Not surprisingly, research among clergy confirms this conclusion, as influence skills were among the areas most frequently identified by experienced clergy when asked to identify weaker points in their decision-leadership skills.⁴

As we consider how to strengthen our influence skills, there are a number of different “models” that are worth considering or reflecting on. While this format does not provide the opportunity for an exhaustive review of the available literature relative to influence skills, I would like to highlight three sources that I have found to be particularly insightful and relevant.

The Center for Creative Leadership emphasizes the importance of using different influence models that depend on the specific situation you are facing. They encourage the use of head-oriented influence approaches (or logic) when it is appropriate to tie into others’ rationale or intellect, heart-oriented influence approaches (or emotions) when it is important to tie into others’ goals and values, and hands-oriented approaches (or cooperation) when it is important to collaborate or consult with others. This flexible influence model emphasizes the importance of identifying what goals, values, and perspective you are bringing to the situation as a leader so that you can come from a place of authenticity (and not manipulation) as you look to influence.⁵

Mark Goulston and John Ullmen developed their “connected influence” model after interviewing people who were noted for “getting things done” but not being “pushy” as they did so. Based on their research of these individuals, they found that effective influence was more about “leading others to get better results” as opposed to focusing on “getting what I want.” They also found that these leaders focused on a goal of getting a sustained commitment from others, as opposed to “conditional compliance.” The goal of these effective leaders was not necessarily to define or to get to next steps but rather to build a platform for strong, lasting relationships that can support continued collaboration and results well into the future.⁶

Tim Baker focused on the underlying capabilities and styles that drive successful influencing, citing four main sources of personal power (or influence): connection, expertise, information and what he deems as “exemplar” power (where someone follows because they identify with the leader and his or her traits).⁷ Baker also identifies a number of tools or approaches to building personal power or influence, including: focusing on building trust, being logical and rational in your approach with others, building alliances, developing rapport with others, becoming a valued asset to others, and being assertively persuasive about things you believe strongly about. He has also developed a comprehensive assessment that can identify your personal influencing styles and your predominant or more-developed influencing strategies (he calls it the “Influences Capabilities Profile”). If you would like to learn more about your personal influence profile, you can find an interactive version at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.



Regardless of any influence model we might consider, we need to start with an understanding of our personality type. Our natural style or personality is often our initial starting point in terms of how we influence or engage with people – and it is also often the approach we instinctively utilize when we are under pressure. Self-awareness of the implications of our personality type is essential to broadening or improving our influence as we look to lead others. While many of us may have taken a personality assessment previously, we likely have not done so or reviewed our previous assessments recently. (I am a personal fan of the Everything DiSC model from John Wiley & Sons, although the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Enneagram both provide valuable insights as well.) The insights from these tools can be tremendously valuable in identifying our basis for how we influence.

Given that all are uniquely created in God’s image, all are naturally motivated and unmotivated by different things. When seeking to influence others, we need to keep in mind that our effectiveness will depend on others’ personalities, needs and preferences, the situation, and our own personality and influence style. The more we can flex and stretch our style to meet the needs of the situation and the needs of others, the more effectively we can lead and influence. Isn’t that ultimately the goal of all Christ followers and the role of pastors?

Reflection Questions:

- How effective do you believe your personal influence skills are? In what situations would you have benefited from your personal power or influence being strengthened?
- What are the organizational influence dynamics within your congregation? In what instances have these dynamics been a challenge for you?
- How does your personality or style impact how you influence others? How flexible or broad is your base of influence skills? Do you consciously flex or change your approach based on the situation or the individuals you are engaging with?

Notes

¹Hinrichs, Ellen. (2019). *Influencing Others*. 7.

²<https://www.betterup.com/blog/power-vs-influence#:~:text=Power%20is%20the%20ability%20to%20impose%20your%20will%20on%20others,deeply%20affect%20behaviors%20and%20beliefs.>

³Ibid.

⁴Gortner, D., Mouzon, A., Johnson, A., & Burruss, A. (2013). *2013 Transition into Ministry Impact Study: Looking at Where We Are Today*. Virginia Theological Seminary. 13.

⁵*Master the 3 Ways to Influence People*. (2020). Center for Creative Leadership. <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/three-ways-to-influence-people/>.

⁶Goulston, M., & Ullmen, J. (2013). *Real Influence: Persuade Without Pushing and Gain Without Giving In*. American Management Association. 35-36.

⁷Baker, T. (2015). *The New Influencing Toolkit: Capabilities for Communicating with Influence*. Palgrave Macmillan. 25.

⁸Ibid. 30-31.



Additional Resources:

If you are interested in a deeper exploration of the importance of influence skills, I recommend these readings as well as two powerful ongoing support opportunities.

My favorite books outlining strong influence models and insights include:

- *Real Influence: Persuade Without Pushing and Gain Without Giving In* (American Management Association) by Mark Goulston and John Ullmen.
- *The New Influencing Toolkit: Capabilities for Communicating with Influence* (Palgrave Macmillan) by Tim Baker.
- *21 Qualities of Leaders in the Bible: Developing Leadership Traits Inspired by the Men and Women of Scripture* (Thomas Nelson) by John C. Maxwell.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including influence skills. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in joining a pastoral self-care cohort or in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your leadership and management skills, or to accompany you on your broader self-care commitment, please contact me at ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com (additional information on mentoring services is available at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as "The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health" through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

