

HR strategy: How to influence and engage



It's no secret that the economic crisis has dramatically changed the face of domestic and global business. With large-scale layoffs and massive budget cuts, businesses must now drive unprecedented performance but with rapidly diminishing resources.

This challenge cuts especially deep for the HR professional. Many are now asking: How on earth can we implement our strategic initiatives without the budget and 'buy in' of the key decision makers? Now more than ever, the answer lies in your capacity to influence.

The latest research from Harvard University's 'think tank' on negotiation and influence (The Harvard Negotiation Project) has identified a number of fundamental sources of influence. The most effective HR professionals are able to tap into these sources to inspire and persuade key stakeholders to support their strategic objectives. Four of the most powerful sources of influence include:

- » Value - influence based on the benefits to those involved ("what's in it for me?")
- » Legitimacy - influence based on the objective wisdom of an idea or proposal
- » Power - influence based on your ability to 'coerce' an outcome
- » Relationship - influence based on how others perceive you

Together, these sources provide a systematic framework that enables you to: (i) understand the different influence strategies available to you; and (ii) and deliberately implement the most appropriate strategy in any given situation.

Let's look at the Value source by way of example. Now we don't need a researcher to tell us that when you propose an idea, the first question your stakeholder will ask is: "What's in it for me?" So your ability to gain 'buy-in' to a proposal or idea is linked to your ability to convince them of its value - to their organisation, to their team and to them personally.

While many realise the importance of demonstrating value, more than a few of us fall into a dangerous trap: When people say 'no' to our initial proposal, we try to 'sell' the idea back to them. Then, when it fails, we simply accept their decision and give up.

The most effective HR influencers don't try to 'sell' ideas - and they certainly don't just accept the first 'no' they receive. They realise that often you won't fully understand all the strategic and personal motivations of your stakeholders. So even well-crafted sales pitches can easily fall on deaf ears. You've missed the mark. You don't really know why they're pushing back.

That's why savvy influencers engage their stakeholders in a problem solving discussion. And they do it by deliberately and systematically uncovering the key drivers, needs and concerns that motivate their stakeholders - and then by working with them to generate creative solutions to address key concerns.

For example, let's say you're trying to introduce an accelerated development program for a talent pool from the merchandise division in your organisation. When you propose this to the head of merchandise, she replies: 'Sorry, we can't do it this year, maybe next year'. Your task now is to uncover why she won't accept the proposal. What are her underlying reasons? What are her key goals for 2009? Perhaps she wants to minimise unnecessary spend before the end of the financial year, and only invest money with a guaranteed return on investment. Or she may want to retain talent and develop future leaders, but minimise interruptions to their daily work.

Once you've identified her key goals and concerns, you're well positioned to propose options to meet these needs. If she's worried about spending, you may suggest the majority of the program to begin at the beginning of next financial year with the planning and selection (unlikely to incur a high cost) to occur in the current financial year. If she's concerned about interruptions, you could suggest a program to run for a year with some sessions to occur after work hours or in lunch breaks. If you can engage her in this sort of option generation process, chances are you'll be surprised by the creative solutions that emerge.

So next time you're faced with resistance from key stakeholders, don't take the standard, "No, we can't afford it right now" line as gospel. Uncover their drivers and find solutions that create mutual value!

About the authors

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