

Influencing skills

Influencing is used to describe an activity whereby you seek to persuade a person or organisation to support a viewpoint or action or, better still, to act in a specific way. In the case of private sector advocacy, the aim may be to persuade a Ministry or Agency or municipal authority to repeal an existing regulatory requirement, or to implement a proposal for a new regulation in such a way that it is less burdensome than it might otherwise have been, or to enforce an existing regulation, or to create a new regulation, or to stop something that the public agency is allowing to happen, such as a corrupt practice.

Principles for successful influencing

The first step in achieving successful influence is to take the initiative: recognising – rather than just waiting, wishing and moaning – the policies and activities that need to be different. The influencing mindset moves away from just complaining to specifying clearly what needs doing and setting about getting it done. Successful influencing requires a healthy combination of interpersonal, communication, presentation and assertiveness skills. It also requires the consideration of a range of options, good preparation and clear prioritisation. To be successful, you need:

- **To be clear about the change(s) required:** Whether at personal or group level, influencing requires adapting and modifying your personal style as you become aware of the effect you are having on other people.
- **Understand yourself and the effect you have on others:** If others perceive you as opposing them, that will shape how they interpret anything you propose or question that you ask. Influencing is generally two way – the party that you are aiming to influence will most likely want to influence you to change your position as well.
- **Do not manipulate others:** It is sometimes tempting to exert influence through coercion and manipulation. You might occasionally even succeed but that is not really influencing. It is forcing people to do what you want, often against their will. It fails the test of influencing because it does not win support. In fact, over the long term, it works against you.
- **Take others' views into consideration:** Invite the other party to put their point of view, so that they don't feel forced – especially if they actually do agree with the action proposed. Where they disagree, people are far more willing to come halfway (or more) if they feel acknowledged, understood and appreciated. Because they feel good about making the choice, people may even end up doing or agreeing to something they would not previously have done.
- **Even when you disagree, do not cause embarrassment:** One of the most powerful forces affecting behaviour is the avoidance of humiliation. No one wants to be embarrassed so take care – offer to work with them, provide them the ammunition that they need to work on your behalf within the organisation.

People don't like to feel manipulated, so take care with your approach. Remember, too, that the people you are trying to influence will be assessing your motives, so be open about your objectives.

Steps for successful influencing

Influencing and negotiating skills are very similar and the steps to success are also very similar. Negotiation implies a buyer/ seller relationship – negotiating over the price of a new car, say – and where there is almost certainly room for compromise and agreement, generally having agreed the facts – such as a mutually acceptable price. Influencing is rather more amorphous – and often includes disputes over the facts themselves. Influencing also covers the position where a policy maker has to choose between mutually incompatible demands – say between businesses and consumers – or has to find an acceptable balance. That is why gathering good evidence can make a big difference. Influencing often requires persuading a number of parties – civil servants, Ministers, Parliamentarians – round to your point of view and probably over a period of time. Influencing may also require that you work with and through third parties. Effective influencing requires that you:

- Identify the right people to influence and get to know them through dialogue;
- Adopt appropriate behaviours and attitudes;
- Engage in effective communication;
- Build rapport with your target audiences;
- Are confident in your position (which requires that you have good research);
- Network widely, build coalitions, mobilise grass roots support.

Effective influencing requires a combination of interpersonal, communication, presentation, negotiation and assertiveness techniques.

In the workplace, people sometimes seek to exert influence through coercion and manipulation, perhaps because they are in a position of power, and they may succeed in getting things done, but that isn't influencing. That's forcing people to do something, often against their will, and that won't succeed in winning support.

Always start reiterating the facts, rather than making judgemental observations – 90 per cent of our members pay 10 per cent of their income because... There can be merit in following the facts with feelings about the facts, though this has to be treated carefully – as a result, they are very frustrated with the government...

The most important part of influencing, however, is offering a solution. You could ask the person whom you are trying to influence if they have ideas, but it is usually better if you can offer a proposal. Offering a benefit to the person or organisation that you are aiming to influence makes a big difference. We are not talking here about personal benefit! For example – enforcing the performing rights legislation will increase our members' income by an average of 20 per cent and that will mean the government gets extra tax income. Benefits could also include public praise, an improved environment leading to more businesses and more jobs, etc.

- Identify the issue and be clear about the desired end result;
- Identify the stakeholders who need to be influenced;
- Research where they are 'coming from'; understand their needs and the other pressures on them, perhaps from other groups seeking to influence their thinking in a different direction;
- Research the issue to ensure that you have all the facts at your finger tips;
- Identify and quantify the benefits to both private and public sectors;
- Be flexible in your demands – a partial move in your direction is better than no movement at all;
- Develop an influencing plan;
- Build coalitions and seek support from other groups who, in turn, might be able to assist you to influence the key stakeholders;
- Launch the influencing activities, build momentum, regularly monitor progress and amend the plan as necessary.