

Regarding Influence

As a parent, you want to be able to influence your child's choices in life. You probably realize that the control you have when your child is an infant will disappear when he or she learns that magic word, *No!*

In life, you are influencing others all the time. Perhaps it's trying to get your children or grandchildren to try something new, or attempting to get your colleagues to adopt your idea. Rather than thinking of influence as an occasional occurrence, begin to think of it as an everyday occurrence. Ask yourself,

- Who are you influencing?
- Who are you being influenced by?
- What allows you to influence others?
- What allows others to influence you?
- When do you see yourself or others resisting?

I think these are the important points about influence:

1. Authority or position power isn't something you can count on or even want to rely upon.
2. The quality of the relationship always matters.
3. Reputation or respect is a make or break point.
4. Social skills and simple courtesies add up.
5. Having the ability to manage a conversation is critical.
- 6: Persistent follow-up is often missing.

Let's take these one at a time.

Authority or position ...

Parents have authority. Law enforcement officials have authority. Managers have position power. But think about it. The influence produced by position or authority is based on consequences, either real or imagined. And while this type of influence produces action, it tends to be action that is forced or done out of obligation. It certainly isn't the action of an individual who is at choice. When you force people to do something they prefer not to do, you create resistance. Effective parents—and managers—do not use their position power.

Now, being clear about who has decision rights and making a decision after hearing all the relevant points and arguments is different. When a decision-making process is handled effectively, most people are fine with the final authority person making the decision.

The quality of the relationship ...

Your initial reaction to what others say is always shaped by the quality of relationship that exists between you. You might give close friends the benefit of the doubt but treat strangers or acquaintances with a bit of skepticism. So given the natural tendency to automatically judge and assess what others say, if you don't have much relationship with them, the first reaction is often negative or resistive. It is useful to train yourself to listen in a generous way and not be stopped by quick judgments.

Bottom-line: In those situations where you want to have influence, put in the time on creating and maintaining quality relationships.

Reputation or respect ...

It's difficult to influence anyone or be influenced by someone when there's a lack of respect. This is why trust and respect are so important. Think about times when you have lost respect for your supervisor or a colleague, or even a family member. When that happens, their ability to influence you is greatly diminished. This leads managers to using their position power, which feels like force or coercion, and that leads to resistance.

This is why it is so important to reflect on how you are seen by others.

- Are you reliable?
- Are you competent?
- Do you deal with the world in a way that has others admire and respect you?
- How do you treat people who are not present?

Social skills and simple courtesies ...

I want to highlight this area because it seems to be missing. Being gracious, inclusive, and interested in others is fundamental to having influence.

Small things do matter. Saying please and thank you. Writing thank you notes. Asking people about their weekend or trip. Following up when you know someone has a difficult situation to handle. People respond to people who are interested and care about them. They like being treated with respect and kindness. Doing so builds a level of relationship that will go along way when you don't have the opportunity to learn more about them and create a deeper relationship. This is also a powerful way to deal with the world in general.

Managing the conversation ...

While role modeling is a powerful source of influence to people who look up to or respect you, it's limited in its reach and velocity. Your actions do speak loudly, and you need to act in a way that is consistent with how you want to be viewed.

Still, most influence comes down to your ability to be effective in conversation. This is why it begins with your ability to listen and speak effectively and is taken to the next level by your ability to manage the conversation successfully. People change their thinking when they can authentically engage in a conversation. Managing the conversation in a way that allows everyone to participate, contribute, and engage is the key to influence.

Persistent follow-up...

Following up with people might seem like micro-managing or not trusting. It's not, even though it might be perceived that way if you don't discuss it with people before hand.

Instead, it is part of ensuring that commitments are kept and that projects continue to move forward. People are busy and you can't count on good intentions. If you want something to happen, follow-up.

*Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher shows up. Kindergarten teachers often understand the craft better than those of us with PhDs, perhaps because students in the "lower" grades are like the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. They do not care what graduate school you attended, or how many books you have written, but they quickly sense whether you are real, and they respond accordingly.*

—Parker Palmer