

Guidelines for Communicating Influence Attempts

Mahfooz A. Ansari



A major managerial function is to do things right. Managers perform this function by spending much of their time communicating--persuading or convincing subordinates to perform or respond in desired ways. Communicating certainly involves the use of power and influence, which make up the fine texture of organizations and indeed of all interactions. Although the two terms--power and influence--are used interchangeably, the latter is broader in scope. Whereas power is the ability to get an individual or group to do some thing, influence involves the ability to alter other people (subordinates) in general ways, such as by changing their level of performance. Altering or changing the behavior of the subordinates requires the use of influence strategies.

We have identified many methods of influencing behaviors, such as physical and environmental control, behavior modifications, or body language. Of these methods, the most frequently studied are the words that managers use to persuade subordinates. Thus, this paper concerns itself with the content (message) of the influence attempt. Unfortunately, there is little research backup for the ideas on power and, especially, influence strategies. Obviously, then, the strategies discussed below are only representative, not exhaustive. Also, the influence strategies which a manager uses can by no means be taken as universally fixed.

Dr. Mahfooz A. Ansari is a Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Kanpur - 208 016. The paper is based on the author's book, Managing People At Work (Sage, New Delhi, 1990).

Influence Strategies

Rational Persuasion. It involves the use of facts and data to support the development of logical arguments. It is by far the most common and effective strategy. A manager can convince an ambitious subordinate that the best way to get promoted is to volunteer for special assignments to gain visibility. Use of this strategy should not be regarded as a form of one-way communication from the manager to subordinate(s). Managers who use this strategy successfully treat it as a form of two-way communication. Rather than simply telling the subordinates "you've nothing to worry about", the skillful manager probes to discover what subordinates are in fact worried about, then tries to dispel these doubts and fears.

Showing Expertise. It involves the use of superior knowledge, competence, or experience. The manager should promote an image of expertise. One common tactic is to show past achievements (e.g., degrees or honors) and other evidence of expertise. Another tactic is to make subtle reference to prior experience (e.g., "When I was plant manager at Steel, we had a problem similar to this one"). It is absolutely essential that the subordinates recognize the manager's expertise and perceive him/her to be a credible source of information and advice. In an emergency, subordinates prefer a "take charge" manager who appears to know how to direct the group in coping with the problem. However, subordinates are likely to be upset by a manager who acts superior and arrogantly flaunts his/her greater expertise.

Showing Legitimacy. It generally involves direct and forceful words, and may be communicated either orally or in written form (e.g., a demand, command, order, directive, or instruction). However, an arrogant demand (e.g., "I don't care if you like it, just do it") is unlikely to result in subordinate

commitment. A polite request is usually more effective (e.g., "Raj, would you please work on the final accounting after you finish the job you're doing now"). Use of polite request is especially important for subordinates who are sensitive about status differentials, such as a subordinate who is older than the manager or a subordinate with multiple supervisors. Making polite requests does not imply that the manager should plead with subordinates or appear apologetic about the request.

In an emergency, it is more important for requests to be assertive than polite. In this crisis, a direct order in the command tone of voice is sometimes necessary to shock subordinates into immediate action (e.g., "I demand that you comply with this request").

However, there are other forms of legitimacy which may be more subtle, which draw upon generally accepted social norms. One such tactic is *Exchange or Bargaining*, which involves the exchange of benefits or favors (e.g., "I did that for you, so you should feel obliged to do this for me" or "I offer my help to you if you do what I want"). Another tactic is known as *Equity* (e.g., "I had to face a lot of difficulties because of you, so I've the right to ask you to do something to make up for it"). Yet another tactic is *Showing Helplessness* which draws upon a norm *help those who are helpless* (e.g., "Look, I'll not force you to do this for me but it's absolutely essential for me that you do so to get the job done. I really feel helpless").

Personal Identification. It depends on a feeling of personal affection, loyalty, and admiration by the subordinates. It is dependent on the quality of superior-subordinate relationship. It is, therefore, essential that the

manager spends some time in face-to-face interaction with each subordinate to cultivate the optimal kind of relationship. The manager has to show consideration for the needs and feelings of the subordinates to treat them fairly and to defend their interests. However, a manager who spends most of his/her time with, and does personal favors to, a few favorite subordinates risks alienating the remaining ones.

Informal Exchange. It involves the use of interpersonal attraction, impression management, and the creation of

Although the two terms--power and influence--are used interchangeably, the latter is broader in scope, whereas power is the ability to get an individual or group to do something, influence involves the ability to alter other people (subordinates) in general ways, such as by changing their level of performance.

goodwill. In a risk-free society like ours, it has been found to be quite effective. Generally, four overlapping tactics fall under this head. (1) *Showing Connections.* Using this tactic, the manager shows his connections with important and influential people (e.g., "You know, I've lots of connection with important people both inside and outside the organization. I can use this connection to get your work done"). (2) *Showing Dependency.* The manager pretends to show his/her dependence on the subordinates (e.g., "I really depend on you. You can decide things for me").

This tactic is similar to showing helplessness. (3) *Opinion Conformity.* The manager acts as a proverbial "yes man" and apparently conforms to each and every opinion of the subordinate (e.g., "Yes, you're right"). (4) *Other Enhancement.* The manager tries to seek the positive evaluation of the subordinates by giving compliments to them to enhance their self-esteem. Generally, sweet and pleasant words are used to make the subordinates feel important.