INFLUENCING UP

- PARTNER WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND OTHER POWERFUL PEOPLE
- PERSUADE KEY DECISION MAKERS
- TURN A DIFFICULT BOSS INTO AN ALLY

ALLAN R. COHEN
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Preface

This began as a book about managing your boss. Although we had addressed this topic in *Influence without Authority,* we discovered that more and more organizational members were struggling with this issue. Some still complained about overcontrolling, micromanaging bosses who gave them far too little latitude, yet many others were concerned about distant bosses—often located far away—whose attention they could barely get and who seemed not to care about them. From dealing with "toxic witches" to "elusive withholders," many asked our advice about what to do. The writing for this edition was under way when our editor at John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Richard Narramore, asked us to consider the possibility of widening the scope of the book to deal with influencing other powerful, senior people, whether at the top of one's own organization or in another organization as potential customer or client, business partner, or vital stakeholder.

We soon saw that even in situations where the powerful person or group to be influenced was less accessible, our core concepts of reciprocity/exchange and treating the powerful as potential partners could ameliorate the negative impacts of great power differentials between the powerful and less powerful. Partnership might be tougher to implement when the powerful don't know you exist—or care to—but it is still a useful mind-set for transforming relationships. Power differentials harm both the powerful and the less powerful, yet influence always involves exchanging what the powerful care about in return for what is desired.

Furthermore, broadening the scope let us utilize what we know about making change from below, another increasingly important topic. Organizations have discovered that in a complex, competitive and changing world, initiative has to come from all levels in order to develop new products, services, and processes that can increase the top line after years of focus on cutting costs. But how do people below take initiative effectively?

At the same time, there has been a leap of interest and research about the behavior of the powerful when there are power gaps. Probably stimulated by the misbehavior of so many corporate and financial leaders, with the attendant parade of corporate and financial executives through the headlines or into court, researchers in many fields designed experiments, surveys, and fieldwork to examine the phenomenon. This was intriguing but somewhat one-sided in focus: seeing the behavior of only those with high power arouses great indignance but omits the role of the less powerful in perpetuating their perceived disempowered state. Seeing the interrelationships between those with high differences in power is a necessary part of the story. It is somewhat less satisfying because it reduces the ability to portray the powerful in totally negative ways—admittedly, occasionally totally deserved, as the victims of Bernie Madoff would attest—but includes the systemic effects collaborated with by the less powerful.

Most important, we concluded that the less powerful didn't have to wait for the powerful to magically be transformed into receptive supporters. They can use our concepts to influence even when those above aren't particularly welcoming or receptive.

The subject turned out to be incredibly intriguing. Although all influence is about exchange, it is extremely hard to make exchanges when the power gap is too large. This calls for reducing power gaps, not by reducing the power of those who have it, but by increasing the power of those who do not have enough. Making senior executives weak is not a very good strategy for growing healthy organizations. For powerful people to be really effective in the long run, they need to have powerful people below, even though many do not recognize this or even fight it. The blindness of the powerful that is a consequence of large power gaps often prevents them from seeing the benefits to them and the organization of having or helping strengthen strong players below.

Once we directed our attention to all this, we found many examples of people stuck on how to make a difference from below who could benefit from what we knew. We also found exciting examples of people who were achieving incredible gains, despite having little formal power. Thus we incorporated interviews, observations, reports by others, and numerous personal experiences where we can now stand back and draw useful lessons. We have included many of the inspiring (and instructive) examples in the book, but we had to leave some on the cutting room floor just to keep the book manageable length. We have added these additional examples to our website, www.influencewithoutauthority.com.

Nevertheless, there is ample material in this book about how to gain influence to enable effective action by people who believe they don’t have enough authority to command the results they want. Even high-power people can benefit from the analysis and examples we bring. Wherever you stand, we hope you will discover how to influence up.

Allan Cohen (Oakland, CA)

David Bradford (Berkeley, CA)

Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed greatly to the book, and we are deeply appreciative to all of them. Yet again we recognize that it takes an influential and caring village to make a book, and we tip our hats to every one.

Our editor, Richard Narramore, helped expand the application of our ideas and made many useful suggestions about the content. Christine Moore did a great job of helping us edit the manuscript into a viable length.

A large number of people provided rich and illuminating examples of the dilemmas involved in influencing upward, and often, how they managed to actually gain influence. Not all of the examples made it into the final edition of the book, due only to space restrictions, but all of them helped shape our thinking and refine our concepts. Thanks to Kathy Brown, Kristen Callahan, Jocelyn Cascio, Lisa Couture, Michael Cummings, Peter Dames, Johan DeBorst, Sam Doblie, Liam Fahey, Ruth Gilleran, Kate Granso, Rachel Greenberger, Paul Horn, James Hunt, Noel Johnson, JB Kassarjian (both for his stunning example in regards to access and great editorial suggestions), Nan Langowitz, Matt Larson, John Maraganore, Michael May, Mike McGuirk, Jennifer Morais, Joel Peterson, Dr. Bohdan Pomahac, Kelly Prescott, Lauren Simkin, Howard Simon, Tom Snow, Richard Snyder, Barbara Spangler, Kaoru and Naruhide Takashima, Karen Vrabel, Bob Weissman, and Yasuhiro Yamamoto.

We also want to mention the inspiration we have received from Nettie Seabrooks, whose entire career demonstrated how a person can be incredibly successful using exchange and dealing effectively with those who have power without ever resorting to self-aggrandizement or nasty tactics.

Iva Toudjarska went out of her way to introduce us to fascinating managers from whom we learned a lot. Bala Iyer was our tutor in the uses of social media, with help from Rachel Greenberger, giving us enough to cause our editor to wonder "how such old guys knew this stuff." Many of our students and managers who have attended our workshops also were very helpful through their questions, challenges, and suggestions.

Research assistant Dan Zolnierz unearthed useful material on power, while several people helped in various aspects of manuscript preparation: Mary Halpin, Wendy Glickenhouse, Kelly Hoover, Marlene Casciano, and Matthew McGuire. Without them, there could hardly be a manuscript!

We are especially grateful to Len Schlesinger, a person extremely savvy about power, both for the conceptual ideas he offered and the great examples from his own career. And as president of Babson, his support for working on the book was wonderful, as was the support of Provost Shahid Ansari and Dean of Faculty Carolyn Hotchkiss.

As always, the responses of our wives and kids provided not only support but instruction, and we are grateful.

PART I

Fundamentals

CHAPTER 1

The World Has Changed

To Be Successful You Need to Influence Up

Influence has always mattered at work. Whether it was necessary to obtain something—like a preferred assignment or a sale to an important customer—or minor favors like time off for personal events, it has always helped to have influence. Nowadays, having influence is even more important—because in order to move up in a company or impact other powerful organizations, you have to deal with a more challenging world.

The rapidity of change and uncertain economies has given way to more complex organizations that have a greater number of stakeholders whose cooperation is necessary—despite the simultaneous need for things to happen more quickly. Many people work in matrix organizations with multiple bosses, or they have jobs that cross departmental boundaries. This requires that they influence others who might not have the same goals or agree on what—or who—is necessary to succeed.

These days, you need powerful people to cooperate in terms of getting information, formal or informal approval to act, resources, introductions, and support (or room to maneuver) for implementation just to get your job done. Therefore, you can't achieve your objectives without getting help from others whom you do not control.

But merely doing your job won’t guarantee that you’ll advance. In an era of cost cutting and increased competition, organizations have to think about how to grow the top line and create new customers, products, markets, or processes that enable investment in growth. The employees who get ahead go beyond their job; they take initiative, create these opportunities, and solve problems that block progress.

This book is for you if you are trying to make significant contributions, yet are finding it increasingly difficult to do so because you need to influence people you can’t control. It’s usually not enough to point out impending problems/opportunities or even to propose solutions. You may have to garner support for your proposed solution or conduct small pilot tests. All of this involves the need to influence powerful people. Fortunately, you are likely in a position to have ideas that are of value to these powerful people. In fact, you are probably closer to the customer, and certainly to the operational problems, than more senior managers. You might have some special expertise or relevant past experiences.

As consultants, we frequently ask managers what they could do to make their organization a more creative, productive place, and the ideas tumble out. However, these are often quickly followed with a drop in enthusiasm as the manager sighs, “But there is nothing that I can do.”

But there is plenty you can do, and we show you with scores of real examples throughout the book how others have found a way to overcome what at first appears to be a discouraging situation. We tell the story of Doug, a national sales manager of a multinational organization, who feels that he isn’t able to use all his skills and knowledge because he has a micromanaging boss. There’s Lucia Emerson at “Grandetech,” who is expected in her role as task force leader to figure out a new system that requires agreement from three very different divisions, each of which has its own objectives. There's also Peter Dames in the IT department at Toyota USA, who has to get on the radar of senior management so he can get them to accept new ways to use e-commerce. You might be like Indira Rai, who is doing well in a company she loves but is blocked from moving into a dream job by her possessive boss. Or you might be able to relate to a team of managers that has put together what they feel confident is an exciting new business idea and they need to gain senior management backing to go forward—even though their cobbled-together first product lost $6 million!

This book is not just for the employee who is expected to take initiative to produce change and bring in new ideas within a company. It's also for those who must influence customers, or for consultants who have to sell an ambitious game-changing project to a client who focuses only on cost—as Mike May from Accenture often did. Or perhaps your challenge is closer to that of Kristen Callahan, who is simply fighting to get an elusive, famous surgeon—the only one with a possible curative approach—to see her sick friend for a consultation. That's an influence success you will learn about in Chapter 12.

Most of the examples in the book describe actual situations, though we've altered specifics in some instances for privacy reasons. Only when we note that we are offering potential dialogue is anything *not* a report from our research and organizational observations.

The issues we discuss are increasingly being faced by managers at all levels, and they can present risks. Going directly to the chief executive officer (CEO), as Peter Dames did at Toyota, to demand that he come and see his department's demonstration is cheeky and could have the potential to be a career-limiting move. We don't deny that. However, "just doing your job," burying your head in the sand, avoiding anything that could possibly get you in trouble, and cursing your fate for having to deal with all those impossible people—these could be the riskiest behaviors of all! Although it is difficult, you need to find ways to successfully fulfill your current role while functioning like an entrepreneurial leader by constantly finding new and better ways to do things—and gaining the support you need to implement them.

This book is about how to both do your present job more successfully *and* take the initiative that will make you a more valued organization member. We can’t totally eradicate risk, nor can we guarantee success; we can only put the odds in your favor by compelling you to see your relationships with powerful people in a different way. We provide knowledge about power differentials and how to overcome the obstacles, and encouragement to change some aspects of the way you have been operating.

Although there’s no doubt that external realities such as very difficult bosses or remote senior managers can present significant challenges (problems we address in later chapters), we’ve found that you, the person seeking influence, often erect your own barriers to achieving that influence. The reasons for this are various and include the following:

- The assumptions you hold about how hard to push
- An unwillingness to raise a tough issue or have a difficult conversation with your boss
- A combative tone that provokes the exact reactions you dislike
- Fear of being turned down
- Inability to let go of your own concerns long enough to remember to give something valuable to get cooperation
- Any problems you might have dealing with authority

These self-limiting attitudes and behaviors are why you will have to take a tough look at yourself at various points in the book, while also carefully analyzing the person or group you need to influence. You have more ability to make a difference than you may think. It will help you to accomplish your goal if you keep in mind the following two conceptual themes that we present in this book:

1. Understanding the dynamics of power and overcoming the negative consequences of large power gaps.
2. Becoming a partner with high-powered people, whether as near as your boss, or as distant as a senior executive far up in your organization or in another organization.

Influence is exerted by reciprocity and exchange; in other words, people can be influenced when they receive something that they value in return for their response. Therefore, anyone can influence anyone else if they have something valuable to trade and can be trusted to deliver it. It’s not always easy to figure out what people value, how to approach them, how to maintain trust, and how to make it clear that you aren’t just looking out for your own interests. We built a generic model for working through all aspects of how to influence through exchange in our previous book, *Influence without Authority.* This book significantly expands on that model by providing examples of how to effectively apply influence when dealing upward.

The Impact of Large Power Differentials

In today’s complex organizational world, you will increasingly be dealing with people who may be neither peers nor friends. These individuals have much more formal power than you have—and that’s especially true when there are many organizational levels between you and those you need to influence. Middle managers have to deal with senior executives more often than ever, and they may need to influence across organizational boundaries as well. Regardless of whether it’s within your organization or between your organization and another, the greater the power differential, the more difficult influence becomes.

Unfortunately, this kind of large power gap tends to produce dysfunctional behavior for people on both sides of the equation. Relatively high-power people tend to overvalue their own contributions and undervalue others’, whereas those with less authority tend to overestimate higher-level individuals’ power and underestimate their own. This makes it hard for both to get what they need. Higher-ups don’t get the information and support they need to complete complex work, whereas those with less power fail to gain the credibility they need to use all of their capacities. We will discuss how this peculiar dynamic works in Chapters 2 and 3 and give suggestions throughout the book on how to overcome it.

Despite these challenges, most people have potentially much greater power than they think they do—and can therefore contribute more than they think they can without diminishing those in high-power positions. We will show how to effectively reduce these kinds of power differences so you can deal with high-power people—especially senior executives—and not fall into the traps that large power gaps often set. As long as you don’t inadvertently give away your power, are willing to do your homework, and act with reasonable courage, you can increase your influence with a variety of high-power people.

Underlying our analysis is the little-realized phenomenon that power is usually *not a fixed amount;* it doesn’t work in a way that means the more I take, the less there is for you.

Thus, increasing your ability to influence usually does not require that you take away others' power. Instead, power is a *variable,* with a total amount that can be low or high. As we will demonstrate, you can decrease the power gap without decreasing the higher party's power. And since significantly increasing your influence can actually add to the other person's power, the outcome is usually win-win.

Becoming a Partner

Once you've come to understand what's at work in the dynamics of power differences, your second job is to adopt the mind-set that you must "become a partner" with authority figures. Although this may sound paradoxical in light of the usual characteristics of a power gap, it is a style of interacting that can have major positive consequences.

Relationships *do* matter for success in organizations. No one can accomplish much working alone, and the nature of how people connect with one another has major repercussions both for the organization's performance and for each individual's access to information and resources. This access determines effectiveness, reputation, and potential for advancement.

As everyone who has ever worked knows, work relationships have the potential to be unsatisfying and ineffective. Either or both parties can feel angry, stifled, mystified, vulnerable, misguided, untrusted, or deeply frustrated. Negative relationships frequently become frozen, with neither person knowing how to improve the relationship. This often leads to both people engaging in negative behavior, thereby aggravating each other and creating an atmosphere in which conditions only worsen and each person constantly blames—and tries to change—the other. Consistently battling these kinds of conflicts ultimately leads to separation—by firing, quitting, transferring, or just ignoring each other.

These negative relationships, however, are not the only kind; work relationships also have the potential to be satisfying and productive. We will describe and advocate a different approach to developing relationships between parties of unequal power. Although this emphasizes the connection you have with your boss, it also includes most other powerful people. This requires that both senior and junior employees move toward a *partnership* in which both are concerned for the other, voice their interests and differences, and think win-win where possible. You can "join with" the boss instead of just "reporting to" the boss—and at least sometimes, you can partner with those who usually expect only transactions, if anything at all.

This was the situation that Mary Quinn faced. She didn't think she could continue working for the "nasty witch" (Fran McNaughton, the vice president [VP] of development in a large software company), who had been her supervisor for the past year. She wrote "May 15" on the white board in her office, which was the day she would receive her bonus check. After that she could resign.

Mary, a business applications specialist, was based in New York, while Fran worked in the Boston office. Most of the time the two women spoke by phone, via abrupt and unpleasant conversations that Mary found dreadful. Fran's clipped, critical style and snapped-off orders had led Mary to feel that she was dealing with a corporate bully. According to Mary's description:

> Fran had obviously never heard the maxim, "praise in public and criticize in private." I would suggest something and receive no response. Two minutes later another direct report would say the same thing and receive high praise. Fran ignored me at national conferences, and instead would hang out with the three

> tech guys on staff—people from whom I would hear that "Fran can't stand you." Though she heard good things about me, she clearly disliked me.

Although Mary's impulses were to demonize Fran and accept the status quo, or quit, she finally decided to take one shot at confronting her in person. She went to New York for a heart-to-heart talk:

> Fran explained what aggravated her: "You go off and call meetings without me being aware; you do other things without asking, like take features out of an upcoming release to make the date without asking me." I acknowledged that what she said was true, but not meant to be disrespectful. I had just been trying to do the job as I had done it before . . .
>
> She smiled for the first time during that conversation, and turned from an ogre into a nice human being. Suddenly we were both people meeting face-to-face, not just managers in a Corporation. Her demeanor changed, and she explained: "It's just that I hear after the fact . . ." I agreed, empathized, and told her how much I respected her knowledge—and her smile grew. I realized that we had both been running away from conflict up until that point.
>
> I began to see her as someone who was trying to please her demanding management; she did have people screaming at her to "get it done yesterday." I therefore became much more sympathetic and invited her to my next meeting . . . I respected her expertise; however, it was hard to forget two years of bullying. So while we were not exactly friendly, we were no longer hostile.

(You can read about Mary and Fran in more detail at our website, influencewithoutauthority.com). What is so hard about directly talking to your boss about how he or she treats you? It seems like an obvious approach, yet way too many people are unwilling or unable to do it. Speaking directly to your boss about the relationship is not always easy to do, but it is a potent way of approaching a relatively powerful person with whom you need to have a productive relationship. Does it always work? Of course not. Your boss may be—at least in your view—far more miserable than Fran turned out to be—nastier, less willing to give credit, more of a micromanager, fearful of conflict. The best you can do in some situations is cut your losses, look for a way out as soon as possible, and resolve to learn from seeing the terrible effects that a really bad boss can have. The problem is that you might be as convinced of the futility of addressing the problem as Mary was. This attitude might be a result of your professional history, strong feelings, vulnerability and fear of being fired or losing the relationship—or just your lack of skill at working on a relationship.

So although it might have been true that Fran really “didn’t like Mary” very much, and found Mary threatening and hard to control, she wasn’t necessarily a bad person who enjoyed attacking at every opportunity. She was simply trying to meet the demands of her own superiors.

When you are in a relationship that has deteriorated like this, it is hard not to attribute all the blame to the boss’s defects, or to assume that things will go badly if you try to address the problems in the relationship. Once you have decided upon your own explanation for your boss’s (or any other person’s) drawbacks, everything that happens tends to confirm your beliefs. Furthermore, since the boss *does* have the potential to affect your future, it can seem overwhelmingly threatening to open discussion on the subject. What if the boss retaliates?

It’s hard not to begin to employ strategies like selective communication or even sheer avoidance as ways of manipulating the boss into not being too harmful. However, this book maintains that you want to influence your boss in a way that more closely resembles a partnership—admittedly with you in the junior partner role—in which each of you delivers in a more satisfying way. We will show you how to go about doing that—even in very difficult circumstances.

These two themes—understanding power differentials and partnering to enhance influence—are interrelated. People often consider power and relationships to be antithetical; they wonder, “Do I use all my power and ability to coercively push for what I want and risk alienating others, or do I go along for the sake of maintaining the relationship?”

However, these two themes are not only compatible; they in fact build on each other. The influence approach we use recommends that people actually build relationships; there is reciprocity and mutuality despite inequality of power, and taking a “partner” orientation increases your influence. Making powerful people partners helps determine their response to the approach. Because this partnering approach is founded on concern for mutual and organizational success, the assumption of potential partnership is most likely to gain cooperation.

Furthermore, understanding the power dynamics between these two groups can help you determine what matters most to those with higher power—which helps you figure out which approach to use to make influence success more likely. If you can accurately diagnose what powerful people value, you can determine how to persuade them and figure out what they might desire in exchange for what you want. It can also help you diminish the power differentials that prevent collaboration.