



**How to**  
***Influence***  
**Decision**  
**MAKERS**

*To put your knowledge to the best use possible, it is critical that you win over the key decision makers in your organisation.*

**Dr. Marshall Goldsmith**

*shares some useful pointers on how you can master the art of convincing the right people for the right reasons*

**T**he great majority of people tend to focus downward. They are occupied with efforts rather than results. They worry over what the organisation and their superiors ‘owe’ them and should do for them. And they are conscious above all of the authority they ‘should have’. As a result, they render themselves ineffectual.” – Peter Drucker

Peter Drucker has written extensively about the impact of the ‘knowledge worker’ in modern organisations. Knowledge workers can be defined as people who know more about what they are doing than their managers do. Many knowledge workers have years of education and experience in training for their positions, yet they have almost no training in how to effectively influence decision makers.

The eleven guidelines listed below are intended to help you do a better job of influencing decision makers. In some cases, these decision makers may be immediate or upper managers – in other cases they may be peers or cross-organisational colleagues. I hope that you find these suggestions to be useful in helping you convert your good ideas into meaningful action.

*Every decision that impacts our lives will be made by the person who has the power to make that decision – not the ‘right’ person, or the ‘smartest’ person, or the ‘best’ person. Make peace with this fact.*

As simple and obvious as this statement may seem, I am amazed at how few (otherwise intelligent) people ever ‘get’ this point. When your child comes home from school and complains, “It’s not fair! The teacher gave me a ‘C’ and I really deserved an ‘A!’”, we, as parents, should say, “Welcome to the real world, kid! In life, you have to accept the fact that decision-makers make decisions – and that you are not always the decision maker.” Once we make peace with the fact that the people who have the power to make the decisions always make the decisions, we become more effective in influencing others.

*When presenting ideas to decision makers, realise that it is your responsibility to sell – not their responsibility to buy.*

In many ways, influencing ultimate decision makers is similar to selling products or services to external customers. They don’t have to buy – you have to sell! While the importance of taking responsibility may seem obvious in external sales, an amazing number of people in large corporations spend countless hours ‘blaming’ management for not buying their ideas. Former Harvard Professor Chris Argyris pointed out how “upward feedback” often turns into “upward buck-passing”. We can become “disempowered” when we focus on what others have done to make things wrong and not what we can do to make things right.



*“Every organisation has limited resources, time and energy. The acceptance of your idea may well mean the rejection of another idea.”*

*Strive to win the ‘big battles’ – don’t waste your energy and ‘psychological capital’ on trivial points.*

Do a thorough analysis of ideas before ‘challenging the system’. Don’t waste time on issues that will only have a negligible impact on results. Focus on issues that will make a real difference. Be especially sensitive to the need to win trivial non-business arguments on things like restaurants, sports teams, or cars. You are paid to do what makes a difference and to win on important issues, not to win arguments on the relative quality of athletic teams.

*Present a realistic ‘cost-benefit’ analysis of your ideas – don’t just sell benefits.*

Every organisation has limited resources, time and energy. The acceptance of your idea may well mean the rejection of another idea that someone else believes is wonderful. Be prepared to have a realistic discussion of the costs of your idea. Acknowledge the fact that something else may have to be sacrificed in order to have your idea implemented. By getting ready for a realistic discussion of costs, you can ‘prepare for objections’ to your idea before they occur.

*‘Challenge up’ on issues involving ethics or integrity – never remain silent on ethics violations.*

Enron, WorldCom and other organisations have dramatically pointed out how ethics violations can destroy even the most valuable companies. The best of corporations can be severely damaged by only one violation of corporate integrity. Hopefully, you will

The effective influencer needs to be a good teacher. Good teachers realize the communicating knowledge is often a greater challenge than possessing knowledge.

*Focus on contribution to the larger good – and the needs of the decision maker – not just the achievement of your objectives.*

An effective salesperson would never say to a customer, “You need to buy this product, because if you don’t, I won’t achieve my objectives!” Effective salespeople relate to the needs of the buyers, not to their own needs. In the same way, when influencing decision makers, focus on the impact of your suggestion on the overall corporation. Don’t assume that executives can automatically “make the connection” between the benefit to your unit and the benefit to the larger corporation.



*“Make a positive  
difference – don’t  
just try to ‘win’ or  
‘be right’.”*

never be asked to do anything by the management of your corporation that represents a violation of corporate ethics. If you are, refuse to do it and immediately let upper management know of your concerns.

When challenging up, try not to assume that management has intentionally requested you to do something wrong. In some cases, a seemingly inappropriate request may merely be the result of a misunderstandings or poor communication. Try to present your case in a manner that is intended to be helpful, not judgmental.

*Realise that powerful people are just as ‘human’ as you are – don’t say, “I am amazed that someone at this level...”*

It is realistic to expect decision makers to be competent; it is unrealistic to expect them to be anything other than normal humans. How many times have we thought, “I would assume someone at this level...” followed by “should know what is happening”, “should be more logical”, “wouldn’t make that kind of mistake”, or “would never engage in such inappropriate behaviour”? Even the best of leaders are human. We all make mistakes. When your managers make mistakes,

focus more on helping them than judging them.

*Treat decision makers with the same courtesy that you would treat customers – don’t be disrespectful.*

While it is important to avoid ‘kissing up’ to decision makers, it is just as important to avoid the opposite reaction. A surprising number of middle managers spend hours ‘trashing’ the company and its or other co-workers.

Before speaking it is generally good to ask four questions:

- Will this comment help our company?
- Will this comment help our customers?
- Will this comment help the person that I am talking to?
- Will this comment help the person that I am talking about?

If the answers are no, no, no, and no – don’t say it! There is a big difference between total honesty and dysfunctional disclosure.

*Support the final decision of the organisation – don’t say, “They made me tell you” to direct reports.*

Assuming that the final decision of the organisation

*“By focusing on the future, you can concentrate on what can be achieved tomorrow, as opposed to what was not achieved yesterday.”*



is not immoral, illegal or unethical – go out and try to make it work! Managers who consistently say, “They told me to tell you” to co-workers are seen as ‘messengers’ not leaders. By demonstrating our lack of commitment to the final decision we may sabotage the chances for effective execution.

A simple guideline for communicating difficult decisions is to ask, “How would I want someone to communicate to their people if they were passing down my final decision and they disagreed with me?” Treat decision makers in the same way that you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed.

*Make a positive difference – don’t just try to ‘win’ or ‘be right’.*

We can easily become more focused on what others are doing wrong, than how we can make things better. An important guideline in influencing up is to always remember your goal – make a positive difference for the organisation.

When I was interviewed in the Harvard Business Review, I was asked, “What is the most common ‘area for improvement’ for the executives that you meet?” My answer was, “Winning too much.” Focus on making a difference. The more other people can ‘be right’ or ‘win’ with your idea, the more likely your idea is to be successfully executed.

*Focus on the future – ‘let go’ of the past.*

One of the most important behaviours to avoid is ‘whining’ about the past. Have you ever managed someone who incessantly whined about how bad things are? When people consistently whine, they inhibit any change they may have for impacting the future.

Successful people love getting ideas aimed at helping them achieve their goals for the future. They dislike being ‘proven wrong’ because of their mistakes in the past. By focusing on the future, you can concentrate on what can be achieved tomorrow, as opposed to what was not achieved yesterday. This future orientation may dramatically increase your odds of effectively influencing decision makers.

In summary, think of the years that you have spent ‘perfecting your craft’. Think of all of the knowledge that you have accumulated. Think about how your knowledge can potentially benefit your organisation. How much energy have you invested in acquiring all of this knowledge? How much energy have you invested in learning to present this knowledge to decision makers – so that you can make a real difference? My hope is that by making a small investment in learning to influence decision makers, you can make a large, positive difference for the future of your organisation.

---

***Dr. Marshall Goldsmith is the million-selling author of the New York Times bestsellers MOJO and What Got You Here Won’t Get You There – the Harold Longman Award winner for Business Book of the Year. Article courtesy: <http://www.marshallgoldsmith.com>***