

Using and Resisting Influence



In a Nutshell

You can't manage others if you can't or won't influence them, and they must be influenced properly. Influencing others is a fundamental managerial activity. Being effective at influencing others usually doesn't mean using your leverage to push them around ... but sometimes it *does*. The best managers actually use a range of influence tactics. When possible, they **reason** with their staff, peers, superiors, etc. to get the cooperation needed. However, in some circumstances, offering something in **exchange** for cooperation works best. Sometimes managers simply have to use **pressure** to get what they need, even though it can strain relationships. Effective managers are also able to resist inappropriate influence attempts from others.

Testimony this month in a Disney shareholders' lawsuit shows the conniving influence tactics Disney CEO Michael Eisner (in the photo above) used to set the stage for the 1996 termination of President Michael Ovitz. Rather than working directly with Ovitz to influence his performance, Eisner sent memos and had private conversations with board members to build a coalition that was dissatisfied with Ovitz and willing to terminate him. Eisner appears to have been too focused on gaining leverage and not focused enough on constructively managing Ovitz.¹

In This Issue

- [Interpersonal Influence Strategies](#)
- [Practicing This Management Skill](#)
- [About the Newsletter and Subscriptions](#)
- [Good, Clean Joke](#)
- [LeaderLetter Web Site](#)

Interpersonal Influence Strategies

You can't be an effective manager if you don't influence others. The definition of a manager in many textbooks is "someone who gets things done through and with others." That's clearly an oversimplification, but it demonstrates how essential influencing others is to getting managerial work accomplished.

Having said that, I should also point out that influencing isn't synonymous with effective management. As I mentioned in [the last LeaderLetter](#), building power bases shouldn't be a manager's primary focus, but managers have to have at least some form of power to be able to do their jobs. The same principle applies to influence (which is the exercise of power); influencing others doesn't prove that a manager is effective, but failure to influence others is often the cause of managerial ineffectiveness.

Choosing the right influence strategy is also a key to managing effectively. Reasoning with someone to get them to comply with your wishes has a lot of advantages as an influence strategy, but there are also circumstances in which it's more appropriate to use some form of exchange or pressure to get cooperation.

Reason. When feasible, the best way to influence others is reason. Managers who primarily use reason to influence others garner more respect and support in their organizations. Using reason to influence others simply means explaining to them why it's important or helpful for them to do what they're being asked to do and relying on their sense of responsibility and conscientiousness to comply. It's feasible to use reason when your relationship with the other party is one of mutual trust and respect, and there's sufficient time to explain your request. Reason also requires some degree of common values and priorities between the parties. If you request

that someone do something because it would "save the company money," "make the client happy," or "reduce employee turnover," that person will only be motivated to comply with your request to the extent that they care about those outcomes.

Exchange. Exchange influence strategies include all the ways we get people to do things by engaging in some sort of trade. Putting an incentive on a certain goal and offering a bonus for a particular assignment are examples of exchange strategies. Ingratiation is a more subtle and potentially manipulative way to use an exchange to influence others. Ingratiation is giving gifts or performing favors to foster a sense of indebtedness in another party. Later, when you want that party to do something for you, that sense of indebtedness can either consciously or unconsciously influence their decision. The advantage of exchange over reason is that you don't have to justify your request--as long as the other party wants what you have to offer they'll comply. Exchange works even when the party you're trying to influence doesn't have the same values and priorities that you do. Exchange strategies answer the "*What's in it for me?*" question. Of course, the problem is that you have to give something to the other party, such as some form of reward or incentive. Furthermore, once you start using incentives to get compliance, people will expect you to offer them inducements when you try to influence them in the future. A drawback specific to the ingratiation strategy is that it can actually cause the opposite of the intended effect if the plan becomes obvious, because people resent being manipulated.

Pressure. Pressure influence strategies involve coercion or intimidation. People comply with these strategies to avoid the negative consequences of not doing so. Sometimes those negative consequences are clearly stated (i.e., coercion), other times they're implied (i.e., intimidation). Some examples of the range of negative consequences that you could use include quitting and leaving someone (e.g., your boss) in a bind, firing someone, docking their pay, requiring overtime, or embarrassing them publicly. The advantage of pressure is that it can get quick compliance, but that's about all I can say in defense of pressure. Pressure tends to create insecurity, resentment, and distrust. It should be used as a last resort.

In summary, reason, exchange, and pressure are used to influence others in organizations. Whenever we can use the reason strategy to influence others, we probably should. Exchange can also be effective, and it's particularly useful when parties have different values and priorities. Pressure can be effective too, but it should be practiced with the utmost care.

[back to the top](#)

Practicing This Management Skill

- **Reason**
 - **Using Reason.**
 - Again, reason is the best form of influence for most situations. When presenting the reasons why we want someone to comply with our request or accept our suggestion, we should consider how our request or suggestion pertains to the personal values of the person we're trying to influence. In the ideal situation, the person we're trying to influence has internalized the organization's values. If so, anything we ask them to do that's consistent with the organization's values will be something they personally want to do.
 - **Resisting Reason.**
 - **Present alternative reasoning.** When someone is trying to use reason to get us to do something, we should respond in one of two ways: (1) cooperate because the reasoning is sound, or (2) tactfully explain why we do not think it would be wise for us to cooperate. In other words, reason can be resisted with counter-reasoning. We may need to call attention to the bigger picture or the flaw in the logic.
 - **Defend your rights.** Some people become slaves to their desire to be helpful to others. Being cooperative and a "team player" is great, but each of us should remember that we have rights. We shouldn't sacrifice our priorities in order to help others. We have a right not to help coworkers who are becoming overly dependent on our help. We have a right to use our free time to pursue innovative projects. We have a right to work a reasonable number of hours. Sometimes we have to assertively stand up for our rights. In pop-psych terms, "people pleasers" need to develop "boundaries."

- ***Firmly refuse.*** Sometimes people are a little overzealous in their efforts to use reason to influence us. They have ideas to "sell" to us. And, like all good salespeople, those zealots don't give up when we voice our objections---they try to answer them. As long as we continue to present counter-reasoning, the debate will continue. Even in relationships that we would like to keep harmonious, sometimes we need to firmly refuse a request and firmly refuse to discuss it further.
- **Exchange**
 - **Using Exchange.**
 - ***Offer favors or incentives.*** To overtly influence others with exchange, we must clearly explain exactly what we have to offer and what we want to receive in return. Any ambiguity in the offer or request could cause the other party to feel cheated later. It can also help to emphasize that "it's a one time offer" so that the party we're trying to influence won't always expect us to dangle a carrot in front of them when we want their help.
 - ***Ingratiation.*** To influence others using ingratiation, be subtle. Overt attempts at ingratiating yourself with others often backfire because people resent being manipulated. You can ingratiate yourself with others by spontaneously doing favors for them or giving them gifts. Even friendship and compliments can be offered for the purpose of ingratiation. Colloquial terms for this are "brown nosing" and "sucking up."
 - **Resisting Exchange.**
 - ***Scrutinize gifts and favors.*** We should consider the motives of people who give us gifts and do favors for us. I'm not suggesting that gifts and favors are always manipulative, but we should decline gifts from people who may be using them to bias our decision making.
 - ***Reject manipulative bargaining tactics.*** When we notice a party who we're bargaining with is using manipulative tactics such as rushing us into an agreement or trying to change terms we've already agreed upon, we should call attention to the manipulation, explain why we don't want to bargain that way, and suggest a different approach to bargaining.
 - ***Stop bargaining.*** If we don't approve of someone's bargaining style, we can refuse to bargain with him or her. Unless we're willing to walk away from negotiations, the other party has leverage over us.
- **Pressure**
 - **Using Pressure.**
 - To use pressure effectively, we must use it sparingly. Furthermore, we must stay within organizational policies and the bounds of what's reasonable. For instance, it's absolutely reasonable to threaten to terminate a staff member who repeatedly violates safety standards, but *unreasonable* to threaten to terminate someone the first time he or she misses a meeting. Finally, we have to follow through with the consequences if we don't gain compliance. If we don't deliver the consequences, we'll have less credibility when using coercion in the future.
 - **Resisting Pressure.**
 - ***Build your power base.*** In the famous words of British historian, Lord Acton, "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Perhaps he exaggerated, but most of us have been in situations where people who've had a lot of power over us have treated us in insensitive and selfish ways. By building our own power base, we reduce the chances of a powerful person pressuring us. See the *LeaderLetter* on [Building Your Power Base](#).
 - ***Defend your rights.*** Each of us has a right not to be exploited. When someone is intimidating or coercing us, we should confront him or her, clearly explain what they're doing that we perceive to be intimidating or coercive, and state that no one should be treated that way.
 - ***Actively resist.*** The only way to deal with some people is by fighting back. By reporting the problem to senior managers or external parties, we may be able to get some relief from coercion or intimidation. You may also get some ideas from this web site on "workplace bullying": <http://www.bullybusters.org/>.

[back to the top](#)

Note

1. Orwall, B. (2004). Mousetrap: In court case, a vivid portrayal of Eisner's boardroom tactics. *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, CCXLIV(102): A1, A9.

Additional Source

Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Photo

AP Photo/Chris Gardner, e-mailed to me November 23, 2004 from *Yahoo! News* (<http://news.yahoo.com>).

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

[back to the top](#)

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Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

Interview with a turkey.

"You're scheduled to be executed in an hour. What's your story, how did you get here? Help me and my readers understand what's in your mind right now. One short hour. Why, you'll baste longer than that afterwards."

"Thanks for reminding me." He lights a cigarette, gripping his Bic with a taloned foot. "What's my story? I'll tell you my story, pal, I was born a turkey. You have no idea what it's like being a turkey in America."

"Tell us, we care, help us understand."

"Look, we're not pretty birds, we don't fly, what do you want from us? We got these gnarly red sacs hanging from our beaks. You know what our language is? Gobble, gobble. That's it. Every word in the turkey language consists of some form of gobble-gobble: gob, obble, ob, ob-ob, obble-gobble--that's the way we talk. We're a threat to no one. Yet, every Thanksgiving without fail, we are rounded up by the millions and cannibalized. And Thanksgiving isn't even our holiday." He goes into a violent coughing fit, choking on the cigarette, his dewlap quivering. I wait patiently. Finally, he sips from a glass of water, regaining his composure.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, peachy freakin' keen. Do you realize that in a few short hours somebody's gonna make gravy out of my giblets? Now, that's just sick." He scowls at his cigarette, snubs it out in a cluttered ashtray. "Geez, nasty habit, smoking. Gonna kill me one of these days." A brief, humorless smile.

"So you feel that the Thanksgiving tradition is cruel and unusual?"

"You tell me. Is genocide by mastication "cruel"? You want "unusual"? Try this: When there is nothing left but bones, fatty deposits, and gristle, I will be made into soup. Turkey skeleton soup. Who in their right mind would eat turkey skeleton soup? What's wrong with fish? Isn't that the other white meat? Big fat catfish goes

good with cranberries. I thought you people were obsessed with your red meat. Why can't Thanksgiving be a steak day? Or deer meat, chicken, possum, dog, or a cat. I don't care, but in the name of all that's holy, please leave us turkeys in peace."

"What do you think of turkey bowling?"

"I think turkey bowling stinks. Next question."

"Would you support a Constitutional amendment that would make the killing of a turkey with the intention of eating it, a Hate Crime?"

"Well, the problem, you see, is that I am a turkey, and last time I looked turkeys hadn't been given the vote. But even if we were U.S. citizens, we'd still just be a bunch of turkeys, and what's that going to do?"

"Do they give you a final meal in here?"

"Yeah. Pellets. Same thing they give us every meal. Tasteless brown pellets that we eat off the ground. I don't even know what it is."

"It might encourage you to know that there is a candlelight vigil being held outside right now in support of your right to life."

"Oh, how sweet. Supper tonight, they'll be fighting over who gets the leg."

"That's kind of cynical, don't you think?"

"I meant it in a good way."

"Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with us?"

"Maybe just that I'll be dead soon and the flesh gnawed from my bones."

"Well, I was thinking of something more upbeat. Can you tell us, for example, what you're most thankful for this holiday season?"

"Well, I've got my health. I'm thankful for that."

"Would you do something for me? Would you wish my readers Happy Thanksgiving in Turkey language?"

"Sure. Gobble gobble."

[back to the top](#)

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