

Effectively Influencing Decision Makers: Ensuring That Your Knowledge Makes a Difference

By Marshall Goldsmith



Marshall Goldsmith is the *New York Times* best-selling author of 24 books including *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* – a *Wall Street Journal* #1 business book and Harold Longman Award Winner for Business Book of the Year. His newest book is *Succession: Are You Ready?* – part of

the Harvard Business Press 'Memo to the CEO' series. He is one of only a few executive advisors who have been asked to work with over 100 major CEOs and their management teams. Over 400 of his articles and videos are available online for no charge at www.MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com.

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Peter Drucker has written extensively about the impact of the knowledge worker in modern organizations. 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 have almost no training in how to effectively influence decision makers. As Peter has noted, 'The greatest wisdom not applied to action and behavior is meaningless data.'

The ten 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-organizational colleagues. I hope that you find these suggestions to be useful in helping you convert your good ideas into meaningful action!

1. When presenting ideas to decision makers, realize 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! Any good salesperson takes responsibility for achieving results. No one is impressed with salespeople who blame their customers for not buying their products.

While the importance of taking responsibility may seem obvious in external sales, an amazing number of people in large corporations spend countless hours in 'blaming' management for not buying their ideas. Chris Argyris has 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.

If more time were spent on developing our ability to present ideas, and less time were spent on blaming others for not buying our ideas, a lot more might get accomplished.

A key part of the sales process is education. To again quote Drucker, 'The person of knowledge has always been expected to take responsibility for being understood. It is barbarian arrogance to assume that the layman can or should make the effort to understand the specialist.' The effective upward influencer needs to be a good teacher. Good teachers realize the communicating knowledge is often a greater challenge than possessing knowledge.

2. Focus on contribution to the larger good--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 effective influencers relate to the larger needs of the organization, not just to the needs of their unit or team.

When influencing decision makers, focus on the impact of your suggestion on the overall corporation. In most cases the needs of the unit and the needs of the corporation are directly connected. In some cases they are not. Don't assume that executives can automatically 'make the connection' between the benefit to your unit and the benefit to the larger corporation.

3. Strive to win the 'big battles' - don't waste your energy and 'psychological capital' on trivial points.

Executive's time is very limited. 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 willing to 'lose' on small points.

Be especially sensitive to the need to win trivial non-business arguments on things like restaurants, sports teams or cars. People become more annoyed with us for having to be 'right' on trivia than our need to be right on important business points. You are paid to do what makes a difference and to win on important issues. You are not paid to win arguments on the relative quality of athletic teams.

4. Present a realistic 'cost-benefit' analysis of your ideas --don't just sell benefits.

Every organization 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. You can acknowledge the sacrifice that someone else may have to make and point out how the benefits of your plan may outweigh the costs.

5. 'Challenge up' on issues involving ethics or integrity--never remain silent on ethics violations.

Enron, WorldCom, and other organizations 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 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. This action needs to be taken for the ultimate benefit of your company, your customers, your co-worker and yourself.

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

6. Realize that your upper managers are just as 'human' as you are

It is realistic to expect upper managers to be competent; it is unrealistic to expect them to be anything other than normal humans. Is there anything in the history of the human species that indicates when people achieve high levels of status, power, and money they become completely 'wise' and 'logical'?

Even the best of leaders are human. We all make mistakes. When your managers make mistakes, focus more on helping them than judging them.

7. Treat upper managers with the same courtesy that you would treat partners or customers - don't be disrespectful.

While it is important to avoid 'kissing up' to upper management, it is just as important to avoid the opposite reaction. A surprising number of middle managers spend hours 'trashing' the company and its executives or making destructive comments about other co-workers. The item, 'avoids destructive comments about the company or co-workers' regularly scores in the 'bottom ten' on co-workers satisfaction with peers.

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. As we discussed earlier, it is always important to 'challenge up' on integrity issues. It is inappropriate to stab decision makers in the back.

8. Support the final decision of the organization --don't say, 'They made me tell you' to direct reports.

Assuming that the final decision of the organization 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. Even worse, don't say, 'those fools told me to tell you'. 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 your manager in the same way that you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed.

9. 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 organizations.

Corporations are different than academic institutions. In an academic institution the goal may be just sharing diverse ideas, without a need to impact the bottom line. Hours of acrimonious debate can be perfectly acceptable. In a corporation, sharing ideas without having an impact is worse than useless. It is a waste of the stockholders money and a distraction from serving customers.

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.

10. Focus on the future --'let go' of the past.

One of the most important behaviors 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. Their managers tend to view them as annoying. Their direct reports view them as inept. Nobody wins.

Successful people love getting ideas aimed at helping them achieve their goals for the future. They dislike being 'proven wrong' because of our 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 on effectively influencing up. It will also help you build better long-term relationships with people at all levels of your organization.

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 organization. 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 that by making a small investment in learning to influence decision makers, you can make a large, positive difference for the future of your organization!

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com