

Influence With Impact: Gaining Commitment and Buy-In

An Interview with Rick Lepsinger



Rick Lepsinger is President of [OnPoint Consulting](#), a [TalentQuest](#) strategic partner. He has consulted on leadership and organizational development for over 25 years and has authored [three leadership books](#). Over the last 20 years he has worked with Dr. Gary Yukl to understand how the best leaders use influence to gain support for their ideas and initiatives. We recently sat down with Rick to discuss the role of [influence](#) in effective leadership and ways individuals can increase their ability to influence others.

TQ: What is the role of influence in today's global organizations?

RL: Today's global organizations need to do more with less. This puts more emphasis on the importance of being able to build consensus among many different audiences and gain the support of many different people who often have competing priorities or conflicting goals. Influence skills are the primary tool leaders have to create alignment and build consensus across a broad constituency.

TQ: What have been the key findings of your influence research?

RL: We found that among the eleven proactive influence tactics used by the most effective leaders, four core tactics are most closely aligned with gaining commitment. They are rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation and collaboration.

Another key finding is that when people receive feedback *and* attend an influence skill training program there is a significantly greater improvement in the leader's use of the core influence behaviors than if they just receive the feedback report to review on their own. The most effective approach to enhance influence skills is to provide the [influence 360 feedback](#), engage the employee in skill-based training, and follow up with one-on-one [coaching](#).

TQ: What advice do you have for leaders and managers who want to enhance their ability to influence others to achieve results?

RL: The most effective influencers understand what is important to the other person from an organizational perspective--goals, business challenges, and what they are trying to accomplish--and at a personal level--values, beliefs and style. This knowledge can help you better position your proposal or idea with the other person or group.

I'd also remind people that influencing is not a single-point event. If you wait until the moment you need to influence someone to establish credibility or build a relationship, you are too late. Developing personal relationships, establishing credibility, and building trust are the foundation for gaining buy-in when the time comes. Everything you do each day lays the groundwork for being able to influence a colleague, boss or direct report when the time comes.

TQ: What should leaders be cautioned against?

RL: Avoid using influence in a manipulative manner. Influencing can too easily slip into manipulation if you withhold information the other person needs to make an informed choice or if your focus is on achieving personal gain versus an organizational benefit.

Also, people tend to move to the 'pressure tactics' too quickly in an effort to save time or keep things moving. This usually has the opposite effect and generally does not save time. Tactics like pressure can be appropriate but only after you've tried everything else without success and the stakes are perceived to be high.

TQ: In your opinion, what is the #1 key to successfully influencing with real impact?

RL: It's understanding that the ability to influence and gain support is the result of multiple interactions over a period of time. Everything you do each day lays the foundation for you to be able to influence others when the need arises. If you wait until the moment you need to influence someone to build trust and rapport or establish your credibility, you will be too late.

TQ: What is the greatest misconception about influence?

RL: I think it would be that you have to be the most senior person in the room to exert influence and get people to do what needs to be done. It's important to understand that the ability to influence is not just based on organizational hierarchy. Our extensive research has identified the behaviors that are used by leaders who are most effective at influencing others and the behaviors that are aligned with gaining commitment. These are tactics that leaders at all levels can use to improve their ability to influence. As much as hierarchy, it's the quality of your relationships and the extent to which people trust you, your track record, and your ability to relate the benefits of your proposal to others' needs that affect the ability to gain the support and commitment of others.

TQ: What are the biggest organizational challenges when it comes to effectiveness and collaboration?

RL: Getting things done in a complex matrix structure with fewer resources. Many, if not most, organizations have reduced headcount over the last 12 to 18 months, either via attrition or layoffs. As such, people are being asked to take on more and more responsibilities and new challenges and to work effectively with colleagues and multiple managers across organizational boundaries. These conditions mean leaders must build consensus among many different audiences and gain the support of many different people. Employees have competing priorities and conflicting goals; so leaders won't be effective simply taking an authoritative stance and saying "this (singular direction, project, etc.) is what we are doing and how we are going to do it." Effective leaders will need to influence others to ensure goal alignment, clear coordination, and collaboration.

TQ: Has the importance of influence changed with current economic challenges?

RL: The importance of influence, to a great extent, has not changed. Influence has been and will always be a key competence for great leadership. In our current environment, it is especially important to rebuild employees' trust and gain their commitment to critical initiatives. The effective use of influence is an important component of building and supporting a high trust environment.

TQ: What's ahead for influential leadership and how can organizations stay ahead of the curve?

RL: In global organizations, working with a geographically dispersed team will mean influencing people from a distance. In order to be able to work together to achieve team goals and objectives, building trust

and credibility will be critical with these remote populations. It will be the leaders of these ['virtual' teams](#) that learn how to influence from a distance who will undoubtedly be the winners going forward.
