

Generate Your Own Power: 8 Ways to Become A More Influential Leader

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In our work my colleagues and I find that one of the biggest challenges business leaders face is how to become more influential. If they were more influential, they reason, it would be easier to get things done. Everyone would like more power. Yet not everyone is happy with what they perceive to be the cost of getting that power. As a result, we often see highly competent individuals backing away from opportunities that would be advantageous for both them and their companies.

One senior leader confided recently, "If that's the kind of behavior that it takes to be successful, then I'm not interested." The problem is, he *was* interested in being more influential. He had a vision for what he wanted to achieve, but he couldn't see his way clear on how to get there. What he was really saying was, "Is there a way for me to succeed and not have to compromise my values? Is there a way to advance in this company and still be myself?" The person asking these questions was not just concerned with advancement, but with fit.

Companies are a lot of things. They are a source of income, a chance to grow, a contributor to society. They are also social systems, governed by written rules and unwritten values. They are populated, as are all social systems, by people who act on these rules and values in ways that cause others to be included or excluded. This is the way families, communities, entire societies work. In a company where our values

8 Principles

1. Commit to making a difference
2. Communicate your values
3. Confront conflicts quickly
4. Build a powerful network
5. Contribute to your profession
6. Think strategy
7. Don't succumb to emotional blackmail
8. If it's time to go, go

are aligned with others, we feel that we belong. If our values clash, we're outta there. But what about those shades of gray? What if it's not that bad, just not 100%?

From our work with hundreds of executives and managers in dozens of industries, we have uncovered a set of 8 guiding principles in use among successful leaders who refuse to compromise their integrity in order to achieve their ambitions. These principles reflect an important insight about the way social systems work: there is no such thing as a perfect fit between the individual leader and the place he or she works. By recognizing that there will always be tension between the system's press for conformity and their own individual agenda, these individuals take a practical approach to increasing their power. They don't waste their efforts trying to change their company's culture. Instead they focus on getting important things done. By adhering to these principles they find themselves building their confidence and increasing in influence. They also sleep better at night knowing that they haven't sold their souls.

The 8 Principles

1. Commit to making a difference.

Companies are full of people who are committed to doing a good (even excellent) job. To become more powerful, however, you also have to commit to making a difference. This subtle shift in mindset helps explain why some leaders continue to expand their influence while others are frustrated by a lack of recognition and opportunity. You don't get recognition and opportunity simply by getting things done well. That is the price of entry. But when you commit to making a difference, you begin to set yourself apart.

2. Be clear about your values; make decisions based on them; communicate your values when you communicate your decisions.

Committing to making a difference and setting yourself apart will ring hollow if there is no substance to the positions you take. That is why this second principle is so important. It encourages leaders to make decisions based on values. Managers with a strong moral compass find they can use that compass to guide them through the day to day ambiguities that threaten to compromise their values. If, for example, you value environmental responsibility and you oversee disposal of your company's hazardous waste, how will you react to a proposal from a contractor offering to cut your disposal costs in half? To an edict from the finance department to downsize your staff? Leadership is tested and power is built on moments of truth such as these. Moments of truth are opportunities to live your values and let other people know what they are. Leaders who compromise their values at these times, compromise their future effectiveness.

3. Quickly confront conflicts with peers and senior management.

If you're going to be influential then you can expect to be in situations where you will need to resolve conflicts. Good decisions by their very nature need to be created from different, often strongly held, perspectives. Speed in addressing conflicts tells others that you are not intimidated by the situation. It also lets them know that you are more committed to producing

results than you are to avoiding a potentially uncomfortable situation. By confronting conflicts you establish yourself as a force for decisiveness.

4. Build a powerful network inside your company.

Gone are the days when aspiring junior managers could ride the coattails of fast track senior managers to high-flying positions. There is simply too much mobility to rely on one person to look out for you. That puts the responsibility squarely on you to identify who needs to be in your network and to seek out opportunities for reciprocity. Successful network memberships are based on exchange because in a social system, exchange of value is what makes the entire system stronger. In practical terms, you should have some people in your network who are helping you more than you are helping them and some the other way around. But in all cases there should be the potential for exchange or your network will be little more than a list of contacts.

5. Contribute substantively to your profession.

We have yet to find a managerial position that did not have an array of professional associations available to support it. If there is a function, there's an association. But how does this principle make you more powerful inside your company? Three ways. First, by contributing substantively, you force yourself to reflect on what you know. That already sets you apart from your peers who spend their days putting out fires. Second, people who engage in social systems outside their primary social system (yes, the professional association is a different social system), tend to bring new ideas back to their home base, enriching their contributions to decisions being made. If you have taken the time to build a strong internal network, even better. You are in a position to influence that many more people with fresh ideas from outside the system. Finally, a network outside your company keeps you in touch with issues that others are facing so that you can calibrate your feelings (good or bad) about your own situation.

6. Have a point of view about how you contribute to your company's strategy.

In our work with senior managers, we have found that we can usually predict how influential people are based on their ability to see beyond the boundaries of their immediate work unit. It's not enough to be a high achiever. That gets you recognized, but ironically it is often a red flag to leaders and other colleagues. If they think you know only about your own area (no matter how much you know), it is only a short leap from that observation to concluding that you are only in it for yourself. Functional excellence is not enough. Enterprise perspective—the ability to see how you contribute to the big picture—is what helps individuals grow in influence.

7. Don't succumb to emotional blackmail.

Virtually all social systems try to keep their members in check by giving and withholding emotional support. If you do x, you won't be liked as much as if you do y. This seems like petty school-yard stuff, but it can get translated into some pretty tough tactics, such as leaving people off distribution lists, not responding to emails, even refusing to acknowledge a pleasant "good morning". Nor is vulnerability limited to junior people. Throughout history business leaders with

a desire to be liked and accepted (Lee Iacocca is one example) have allowed their decisions to be influenced by emotional blackmail. If you find yourself in a situation where you are feeling the pressure of emotional blackmail, we suggest you reconsider the first six principles: Have you committed to making a difference? Are your values visible in the decisions you make? Are you confronting conflicts or allowing them to fester? Do you have support from networks inside and outside the company to help you gain perspective? Are you aligned with your company's strategy and confident you are headed in the right direction? If you can answer yes to the above questions and are still feeling the pressure of emotional blackmail, then we suggest you proceed to Principle 8.

8. If it's time to go, go.

You may realize for any number of reasons that staying at your company is no longer right for you—lack of opportunity, emotional blackmail, values conflicts, etc. If you find yourself needing to leave your company, your initial reaction (since it is a social system) is likely to be highly emotional. People report feeling cut off, banished, ostracized, even when it's their decision to leave. Those are the normal reactions to leaving a social system. However, in today's dynamic business environment, you'll be stronger if you are aware of your feelings, but don't let them control you. Remember, it's only a company, and by making a conscious choice—either to stay or to go—you are exercising the most powerful decision of all.

These eight principles share one underlying assumption: the formal structure of an organization is limited in the power that it confers on individuals. If you think you will have more power simply by getting that promotion, you're likely in for a rude awakening. The position may have more power than your current position, but you as an individual do not become more powerful solely by virtue of the title you achieve. Real power in social systems comes from the way you act regardless of your position in the hierarchy. That reality plays out in even greater relief in today's flattened, meritocratic, knowledge-based organizations.

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