LEADERSHIP

Building and Sustaining a Climate for Influence:

Leadership Behaviors that Invite Engagement

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You hired talented people and asked for their best ideas, yet few offer them. How a leader's own responses can shut down, or open up, engagement.

You hired the most talented people. You asked them to contribute their best ideas. You believe that you are open to suggestions, and you have often told them that you would welcome constructive criticism. Still, members of your team rarely offer a critique of the status quo or new and creative solutions. Recently, you asked an internal consultant to sit in and observe a team meeting and provide feedback to you. When you sat down with her afterward, you were surprised by her comments and concerned about the possible impact of your responses.

WHAT THE CONSULTANT OBSERVED

- "I noticed that you frequently stated your opinion about what to do and only then asked the team members what they thought." **Impact:** Team members believed that alternatives would be unwelcome; that the decision was already made.
- "Of the nine people on the team, only three of them offered their ideas." **Impact:** You missed hearing from people who might have offered useful alternatives.
- "When an idea that you liked was offered, you often praised it immediately." **Impact:** Team members assumed that you were indicating the "right answer."
- "When an idea that you didn't like was offered, you criticized it immediately." **Impact:** Team members became unwilling to risk sharing unusual ideas. Thus, there was no opportunity to develop a new and different approach.
- "You said you were open to a variety of ideas, but once you heard one you found acceptable, you quickly moved on." **Impact:** Team members felt discouraged and stopped offering creative alternatives.

This feedback helped you see how you, as a leader, were making it difficult for your team members to think beyond current practices. You asked the consultant to recommend some ways that you could build and sustain a climate that would encourage broad engagement, creativity, and innovation. The consultant offered some useful suggestions:

- Use processes that invite others to contribute:
  - Provide questions before a meeting and ask people to bring their ideas to the meeting.
  - Use a "round robin," "nominal group process," or other brainstorming-type intervention to ask people to share one idea or pass, going around as long as ideas keep emerging.
- Demonstrate deep listening and curiosity in informal discussions when someone makes a suggestion.
- Make sure to engage team members on issues where you can actually be influenced – where a decision has not yet been made.
- Use influencing language – acknowledge that we are often engaged in a process of mutual influence. Make it discussable. "I'd like to influence you to…"
- Let others know how best to influence you and invite team members to do the same.
- Ask for ideas and explore them before judging or critiquing. Make the time for generating ideas separate from the time for judging, improving, and then deciding on them.
- If you haven't heard from a team member for a while or on a topic, ask them to contribute, i.e., "Pat, I'm curious about your thoughts related to this issue." "Krishna, I know you have come up against this before. How do you think we should deal with it?" "Sophie, you have an important role in making this work – how can we best support you?"
- If you receive little feedback from the team on a topic you see as important, you might say, "It has been (many) days since we met to discuss (a specific issue.) I'm looking forward to receiving suggestions from many of you so we have more options to discuss at our next meeting."
- Model a non-defensive, curious response to criticism or disagreement. "That's interesting. What's your evidence for that?" "How did you come to that conclusion?" "Help me understand how that struck you. What issues does my idea raise for you?"

Using these leadership behaviors consistently, you can establish a team or organizational culture that welcomes new and unusual ideas, that invites engagement, that rewards curiosity and creativity. You will have initiated or sustained a climate in which mutual influence is expected and appreciated. This kind of climate promotes innovation, openness to change, and organizational vitality.

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Originally published on LinkedIn, June 2, 2026.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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