PROJECT TEAMS

# Exercising Influence in *Project Teams*

**B. Kim Barnes**

THE INFLUENCE GURU

Working on a cross-functional team means operating outside standard reporting relationships. Results have to be achieved through influence rather than power.

## Overview

By definition, working in a project or other cross-functional team means that you are operating outside of standard reporting relationships. Thus, results must be achieved through influence rather than power. Skilled influencers are able to get things done through other people, whether or not they hold formal power.

Successful influence requires the ability to read the situation, the tactical understanding to choose appropriate influence behaviors, and the skill and flexibility to use a variety of behaviors successfully.

In a project team, the opportunities for influence are infinite. Decision-making, planning, creative thinking, problem-solving, conflict resolution — all are enhanced through the skillful use of influence.

In *Exercising Influence*, we distinguish between **Expressive** (sending) and **Receptive** (receiving) influence tactics and behaviors. Following are some suggestions as to how each tactic and its component behaviors can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of project teams.

## Using Expressive behaviors in project management

The Expressive behaviors — **Tell**, **Sell**, **Negotiate**, and **Enlist** — are used to stimulate, persuade, induce, and attract team members and others in the project community to agree or to take action. They are essential to the team leader and members in communicating the energy and conviction behind their ideas, building enthusiasm for the team vision and goals, and in resolving resource and scheduling conflicts.

## Tell

Expressing needs and ideas in a compelling and efficient way is an important first step in gaining support, cooperation, and action within and outside of the team. Learning to use Tell behaviors effectively enables team members to learn about one another's ideas and to know what help and support is needed. This is essential for mutual support and for stimulating a diversity of ideas and solutions.

## Sell

In a cross-functional team, each person may have a different area of expertise. He or she must be able to support suggestions with reasons or benefits that will be compelling to people of widely differing backgrounds. This may be done in team meetings or off-line. Team meetings can bog down when members are not skillful at communicating important information and recommendations in an efficient and convincing way. Learning to use Sell behaviors effectively enables team members to gain support and avoid lengthy, rambling, and ineffective meetings.

## Negotiate

Although an effective team is aligned toward a common purpose and has many interests in common, there will always be some conflicting interests as well. This is both normal and necessary, to ensure that the interests of the larger organization as well as those of customers, shareholders, and key suppliers are represented and championed. Meeting time is often wasted in ineffective argument instead of bringing forward and resolving the conflicting issues through a process of negotiation. Learning to use Negotiate behaviors enables team members to resolve problems and create agreements through a process of fair exchange, striving to fulfill the needs of all parties in a creative and productive way. Negotiate behaviors will also be crucial in acquiring the resources needed for a successful project.

## Enlist

Project teams must be aligned toward a common purpose. Team members typically begin with different ideas about goals and priorities. In order to become an aligned and energized team, leaders and members need to be able to create and sign on to a common vision that will bind them together and inspire them to move with purpose and commitment through the inevitable difficulties that any project will experience. Learning to use Enlist behaviors also enables team members to attract the support of those outside the team who are important to the team's success. Enlist behaviors will also help in attracting the right people to be part of the team.

---

*Because teams are usually not hierarchical in nature, order-giving is not acceptable. Those with the greatest knowledge about an issue must make action decisions that they can live with.*

# Using Receptive behaviors in project management

The Receptive behaviors — **Inquire**, **Listen**, **Attune** and **Facilitate** — are used to guide team members in their process of learning and working together. They are essential to the processes of eliciting key information, building and maintaining a climate of trust, respect, and openness, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and removing barriers to action, both within and outside of the team. The Receptive skills ensure that team learning takes place through dialogue and exploration of issues. The Receptive skills are also the key to understanding customer or sponsor needs and requirements. These behaviors are especially useful for virtual, dispersed, and global teams in order to facilitate engagement and alignment.

## Inquire

In a cross-functional team, a free exchange of information is both necessary and difficult. In order to have team support for decisions and actions, and to make sure that the decisions are made based on all relevant information, all members must be invited to contribute their knowledge, ideas, and suggestions. Encouraging the frequent use of Inquire skills in meetings and in one-to-one conversations prevents unproductive debate and problems relating to missing information. Inquire skills help in the development of good decisions and solid agreements.

## Listen

Because team members rely on one another, it is especially important that they are clear about what needs to be done. Since what is sent is not always what is received, active listening at a basic level means that team members understand the actions that others need them to take. Checking understanding of team agreements allows everyone to “be on the same page” — thus preventing misunderstandings and actions that are at cross-purposes with team goals. At a more sophisticated level, listening can help guide the thinking of a team member or key stakeholder about key issues, enabling the team to move toward agreement and action more efficiently.

## Attune

A team that shares a high level of trust will be willing to take risks together and go the last mile in order to achieve outstanding results. The ability and willingness to empathize with one another’s concerns and to be open about disclosing information that is somewhat difficult to reveal, involve the influence skills of Attuning. Learning to use these behaviors effectively will enable team members to develop the “esprit-de-corps” that distinguish high-performing teams from mediocre ones, where blaming and “CYA” behaviors are common.

## Facilitate

For team leaders or anyone taking a leadership role on the team, the Facilitate skills play an important role in helping others to move past barriers to action. Because teams are usually not hierarchical in nature, order-giving is not acceptable — those with the greatest knowledge about a certain issue must make action decisions that they can live with. A good set of Facilitate skills keeps the responsibility for moving forward with the

person who is most accountable and yet provides a way for others to support him or her in moving toward a decision.

---

## B. Kim Barnes

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.

**bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes**

© 2026 B. Kim Barnes. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced without permission.