INTERNAL CONSULTING

Influence: *The Business Partner's Essential Skill*

B. Kim Barnes

THE INFLUENCE GURU

An internal business partner has no role power and no legitimate authority. That makes the job the ultimate influence opportunity.

In jokes and dreams, the role of business partner is that of a respected expert — someone who is valued and paid highly to give advice. In reality, many of us serve as consultants to one another, paid or unpaid; and our advice is often distorted, treated as bad-tasting medicine or ignored. Being a partner and consultant means never having to say, "do this or else!" By definition, an internal business partner does not have role power or legitimate authority. Succeeding as that business partner is the ultimate influence opportunity.

The phases of internal consulting

There are various models that describe the process of consulting. Here is a generic description of the phases of consulting for internal business partners:

Entry

The consultant connects or reconnects with the client to offer or to respond to a request for assistance.

Agreement / Contracting

The parties come to a joint agreement about goals, roles, outcomes, benchmarks, and process.

Needs Analysis

The consultant gathers information through observation, interviews or surveys in order to understand the situation.

Recommendations

The consultant offers the client an independent view and a set of recommendations.

Interventions

The consultant and/or the client take the recommended actions to achieve the desired outcome.

Evaluation

The consultant, client, and possibly the client's team review the results and consider what has worked and what still needs to change; they may identify next steps.

Exit

The consultant takes a step back but remains available for follow-up as needed.

The *Exercising Influence* model provides a practical set of tools for the internal business partner. During each phase of the consulting process, excellent and tactical use of influence skills enable you to be more successful in that role.

Matching the behavior to the phase

Entry

During the Entry phase, the HR Business Partner needs to gather some basic information about the client and the nature of the problem or goals of the project. The Receptive skills will be most useful here. **Asking Open-ended Questions** and **Checking Understanding** will be especially helpful.

Agreement / Contracting

While in the Agreement/Contracting phase, it will be very important for you to **Express Needs** that are relevant to roles or resources in the process. You may need to **Offer Incentives** to your client to play a specific role or **Describe Consequences** or **Encourage** if he or she does not choose to take specific responsibilities. In addition, the **Facilitate** behavior will help in getting the client to identify actions that he or she will take.

Needs Analysis

A deeper Needs Analysis, usually done with a number of stakeholders, may use one-to-one interviews or a focus group methodology. These interviews, whether done face-to-face or using distance technologies, will use both the Expressive and Receptive behaviors. In particular, an interview may begin either with **Suggest** or **Disclose**:

TWO WAYS TO OPEN AN INTERVIEW

- *I'm here to learn about your current workflow. Please tell me what works best about it and what needs improvement.*
- *First, let me explain why I am here. Your manager asked me to look into the current workflow and get everyone's opinion about it, then make some recommendations.*

Ask Open-ended Questions, **Draw Out**, **Check Understanding** and **Test Implications** will be useful during these interviews.

Recommendations

Once you have decided on a set of recommendations, you will find the Expressive skills especially useful in presenting them to the client and planning for the interventions. **Suggest**, supported by **Offer Reasons**, provides a rationale for the process you are proposing. If you are working interactively with your client, these will be interspersed with the Receptive behaviors to gain buy-in, manage defensiveness or resistance, and identify areas of concern. At times, it may be useful to **Envision** with your client the results of a particular intervention.

Interventions

Your recommended interventions may be carried out cooperatively by you and the client; alternatively, you may play a background role while the client carries them out. This requires a high level of trust between you based on your initial work together. Depending on the nature of the interventions chosen, you will have the opportunity to use any of the behaviors to help you get others to take appropriate actions.

Evaluation

During the Evaluation phase, you will return to the use of Receptive behaviors, primarily to learn what worked and what did not. These behaviors are particularly important in order to avoid the defensiveness that sometimes occurs when an intervention has not gone well and prevents both the consultant and the client from learning from the experience.

Internal business partners are often very skilled in using Receptive behaviors in a coaching or counseling role. It is challenging, yet rewarding, to learn to apply these behaviors in pursuit of a specific goal so they can be used as powerful tools for influence.

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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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