INFLUENCE

Influence Readiness:
Setting Yourself Up for Success

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We are often clear on the aim and skilled at the delivery, yet give readiness a pass. Going a level deeper on results, relationship, and context.

We often hear the term "ready, fire, aim" to describe the reactive way that some individuals and organizations respond to problems and opportunities. I have a different view, at least when the problem or opportunity involves the need to influence. Even though we might be clear on our influence objective (aiming) and skillful at using influence behaviors (the equivalent of firing, I suppose), we often give readiness a pass.

So what is readiness when it comes to exercising influence? It means, first of all, that you have done your preparation. You've clearly identified the results you're looking for. You're confident that you have a positive and productive influence relationship with the other. You've identified key contextual information that needs to be taken into consideration. You've even put yourself in the other's position enough to be able to predict how he or she might respond to you – the issues that will likely arise related to your offer, request, or suggestion. That's a good start. But let's go a level or two deeper.

Results

- Have you identified the need that's driving you to influence this other person?
- If you've identified your need, have you considered alternative results that might meet that need as well as or nearly as well as your preferred result?
- Have you considered both your long-term goal and specific influence objective with this person?
- Have you thought about incremental, step-by-step objectives that would move you closer to your long-term goal?

Having greater flexibility allows you to make progress under a greater range of circumstances.

Relationship

- Have you reflected on the past, present, and future of your relationship?
  - If there's an unresolved issue from the past involving you or your team, have you taken the time to resolve it before initiating your influence approach?
  - If you don't have much of an influence relationship in the present, have you thought about how you might build a history of successful two-way influencing before you move on to something that requires a lot of commitment?
  - Have you decided that this relationship has a future and it's worth putting extra effort into developing it?
- Have you assessed the level of trust, respect, and shared values or vested interests between you and the other? If any of these is on the low side, have you decided on a strategy for changing or dealing with that situation?
  - If trust is low, one thing to do is disclose something that makes you just a little vulnerable (your motivation, concerns, needs, for example.) Or find a low-key way to demonstrate trustworthiness, such as promoting the other's ideas with full credit to her in a public way without asking for or expecting anything in return.
  - If respect or credibility is lower than you would like, consider working with a person whom the other does respect – professionally or personally. Influence that person to support your idea or proposal and to make it clear to your influence target that he or she agrees and can recommend it.
  - If you find that you have many values in conflict, try drawing him out and listen with respect to the way he sees the world. Show interest and curiosity even if you don't agree.
  - If you have few shared vested interests, learn more about what she has to gain or lose in the situation. Then look for a fair solution or exchange that will be meaningful to her and, at a minimum, not harmful to you.

In these ways, you can develop a strong influence relationship over time so that influence readiness is easier to achieve.

Context

- An important component of readiness is timing. What does a study of the context suggest to you about the timing for your influence approach?
  - Looking at individual context, what goals or priorities is the person most focused on now? If your influence topic will help him to achieve it (from the target's point of view), then the timing is right. If it's very off-purpose for him, then wait until after things are less pressing. Is she a lark or an owl? What time of day is he most likely to be open to a conversation – or doing something where a conversation wouldn't interfere (mealtime, breaks, a run, on the way to or after a meeting). What modalities does he respond to best? In person, on the phone, via a web tool or email? Is she an introvert? Then you can help her prepare by sending an agenda or information in advance rather than springing it on her.
  - With organizational context, tune in to the strategic imperatives and consider how to demonstrate how your idea or proposal fits and moves important initiatives along. Understanding what is needed now can be useful in choosing the right time to present your initiative to a key stakeholder or decision-maker. What are the cycles in the organization – budgetary and otherwise? When will a new idea get the best hearing, given what else is going on?
  - Understanding the cultural context can be helpful as well. In global companies, be aware of the difference in calendars – vacations and celebrations may be different and your messages may linger unread or unheard while

your colleagues are on holiday or distracted. Even across departments, there may be celebrations or professional events that people are focused on, limiting their availability for influence.

Using all of this information enables you to plan when and how to initiate an influence discussion.

The ideal "readiness climate" for influence has the following characteristics:

THE IDEAL "READINESS CLIMATE"

- You and the other person are able to focus on the topic at hand with minimal distractions.
- Neither you nor the other is rushed or overly stressed.
- You sense or have been able to develop a reasonable level of trust, respect, and alignment of values and interests between you.
- You're prepared to show how your idea or proposal will be of value to the other and/or the organization.

Taking the time to evaluate and increase your readiness for influence and the other's readiness to be influenced as well as planning your approach is likely to provide a real return on your investment in preparation.

To learn more about exercising your influence, once you are ready, see Exercising Influence (Wiley, 2015) or visit bkimbarnesconsulting.com.

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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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