

Organizational Culture *and* Influence

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

Two variables — how power is distributed and how information travels — go a long way toward explaining the culture you are working in.

A few years ago, “empowerment” of employees was seen as a key to success in navigating the complex changes organizations were undergoing. Sadly, employee empowerment is a term that has little use or relevance today because, like many good ideas, it has become a buzzword that symbolizes half-hearted or poorly planned attempts to change the fundamentals of an organization’s culture. Most organizations today understand that employees’ relevant commitment to business and other corporate goals is the key to success in achieving them. Sophisticated leaders are aware that involvement precedes and is necessary to commitment. The kind of involvement that leads to commitment, however, means more than the opportunity to provide information and express concerns. It means the ability to understand the issues and, where appropriate, to make or influence decisions directly.

Two important factors in determining the culture of an organization are **the distribution of power** and **access to information**.

When power and information are held closely

Where both power and information are concentrated in a few hands, there is likely to be a high degree of cynicism in the culture. Employees don’t really know or understand what is going on and they feel powerless to take action even if they think they know. A natural response is to be self-protective, suspicious, and mistrustful of the leadership. During a merger, for example, employees tend to believe that there is much going on that they are not privy to and have no control over. As a result, their productivity is usually compromised, rumors abound, and talented employees may choose to leave.

When information flows but power does not

When information is broadly distributed without the power to take action on what has been learned, much energy will be used in complaining. Employees in this kind of culture typically believe that their ideas are not valued and that, while they are kept informed, the decisions that will affect them will be made regardless of their preferences. While the complaining is usually indirect, it is usually accompanied by some sense of inclusion and ownership of the issues. When employees are informed about important changes after all key decisions have been made, even if they care about the organization and wish to stay, there is little they can do except complain.

When power is decentralized without shared information

Some organizations, in response to a need for greater autonomy on the part of business units, decentralize power and allow units to “do their own thing.” If information is not also made available through formal and informal cross-boundary networks, these units may proceed in different, often contradictory directions. The resulting organizational culture is chaotic and undisciplined; often internally competitive. There is an inability to execute strategy or tactics that require alignment.

Only where information and power are both broadly distributed can a culture of influence develop and thrive.

A culture of influence

A culture of influence is a setting in which people with important information can create and distribute knowledge that others can use in making wise choices. It is a culture in which knowledge, expertise, and accountability rather than rank and role determine decisions. Only where information and power are both broadly distributed can a culture of influence develop and thrive.

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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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