INFLUENCE

Power, Influence, Authoritarianism:
How Do We Understand the Difference?

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

Power that comes from being feared gets compliance, not changed minds. Influence puts power to work while building relationships.

These days, I'm troubled by the way power and influence are understood. Polls and recent election results from several countries suggest that many people are attracted to the idea of a "strong leader" – i.e., an authoritarian. In fact, there are many kinds of power – positional power, referent power (derived from one's closeness to a source of power), relationship power, information power, moral authority, and many other names for the "ability to cause change," as an old teacher of mine defined it. Personal power is based on a set of resources, tangible or intangible, that one controls, including personal properties such as beauty, intelligence, celebrity, and charisma. It is responded to or respected by those who need or want something from the person in power. It can be used for good or evil; to save or to destroy. Authoritarianism in families, government, or organizations means a concentration of power in the hands of the few with the absence of individual freedom to make important choices.

Reading today's headlines, one might think that power and influence derive only from being feared. And indeed, military and police power, authoritarian rule, and the ability to hire and fire, for example, have in common the resource of being able to hurt, punish, or to extract concessions in exchange for compliance with the wishes of the person or group in authority. This kind of power, however, is not influential. Minds are not changed. Actions are often taken under duress, and the results are frequently of poor quality. People at the receiving end of authoritarian power do what they think they must do to avoid reprisal.

Influence is about putting power to work. It means recognizing one's sources of power and applying them through interpersonal behavior to achieve results. It's easier to influence someone with whom we have an existing relationship, someone who needs our support, or someone who respects us. Skillful influencers achieve results while building and/or maintaining relationships. Those who are influenced take actions that they are willing to take. Agreements are based on mutual interests, so micro-managing with close follow-up is not really needed.

Many years of observing, studying, writing about, and teaching influence skills have taught me that powerful influencers, those who are able to lead or guide others to take actions they didn't originally plan to take, share three personal qualities: they are curious, respectful, and persistent. Two out of the three qualities may be attractive, but not particularly

effective. (Think about people you know who are missing one of these essential qualities. How effective are they at influencing you and others?)

- **Curiosity** helps you develop a "theory of mind" – the ability to take the perspective of the person you would like to influence. "What makes this person tick? What issues will arise for them when they know what action I want them to take?"
- **Respectfulness** means that you treat the other person as a sentient, intelligent being with their own priorities, needs, and concerns. You think: "What would be meaningful or acceptable to this person? What might they need from me?"
- **Persistence** is the ability to be goal-oriented and flexible. When one approach doesn't work, you try another. When the timing is off, you disengage temporarily, then come back later, having used the time in between to learn more about what works for that person and to develop another approach.

The combination of power and influence in an individual with high ethical standards contributes to truly strong leadership. In a democratic society or an innovative workplace, in which those being led must feel valued, this kind of leadership allows people to perform at their best, to find great meaning in their work and lives, and to produce superior results.

Powerful influencers share three personal qualities: they are curious, respectful, and persistent.

Originally published on LinkedIn, November 27, 2023.

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.