ETHICS

The Ethics of Influence:
Doing Well by Doing Good

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

Influence is named as a key leadership skill, and in many organizations it is almost never practiced openly. For most leaders, manipulation is a skill deficit rather than a preference.

In surveys of executives, influence is usually cited as one of the most important skill sets for leaders. Leaders are encouraged to learn effective communication and influence skills and use them in a conscious and tactical way to achieve specific objectives. However, in some organizations, the open use of influence is seldom seen and rarely encouraged. Instead, leaders attempt to achieve results either through the direct use of power or through manipulation – i.e., through maneuvers that are false or where their true intentions are hidden. Some languages don't distinguish between the two words and people in many organizations fear using influence skills openly – yet they still need to get things done through others. For most leaders, manipulative behavior is most likely the product of a skill deficit rather than a conscious preference. They may never have observed someone who had a conscious and tactical approach to influencing others – or they may have assumed that person had unusual charisma that enabled them to move others toward their desired outcomes. In fact, influence skills can be learned and leaders can create environments that encourage the open use of influence.

Let's differentiate here between the concepts of influence and manipulation. The objective of both is to move another person or persons toward taking action – often a specific action. In the case of influence, this is done openly; the other person is aware of being influenced. They are free to accept or reject the approach and/or to respond in an influential way themselves. Manipulation, on the other hand, is done, for the most part, in secret. It's associated with "hidden agendas" and dishonesty. The other person may or may not be aware that they are being manipulated and, either way, they are not likely to call it out or respond in kind at the time it is occurring.

Here are some ethical practices related to influencing:

> ETHICAL PRACTICES IN INFLUENCING
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> - Let the other person know what you want to achieve and be open that you are hoping to influence them to take an action related to that desired outcome.
> - Share your motivation for achieving the result and why you have chosen to influence them, specifically.

- Listen to their response and look for ways to accommodate any concerns or issues.
- Be honest and straightforward in your use of facts to support your request.
- Be fair and open in sharing risks or other factors that the other should be aware of and consider.
- Be willing to discuss a fair exchange should the other agree to take the action.

Being truly influential requires us to be respectful of the other person, open about our intentions, flexible in finding agreements, and committed to ensuring that they are fully informed.

Note: If you are interested in exploring this topic further, you may want to read Chapter 16 of my book, Exercising Influence,[1] entitled: "The Ethics of Influence: Doing Well by Doing Good." (For those of you of a certain age – yes, that's a reference to the Tom Lehrer song, "The Old Dope Peddler.")

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NOTES

[1] Exercising Influence: A Guide for Making Things Happen at Work, at Home, and In Your Community, Third Edition. Barnes, B. Kim, John Wiley & Sons, 2015

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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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