INFLUENCE

When Influence Fails:
Knowing When to Let Go

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

Some situations don't lend themselves to influence, no matter how skillful the approach. How to recognize them, and what to do instead.

As a long-time student of interpersonal influence, a frequent speaker and author of a book on the topic,[1] I'm inclined to assume that a failure to influence (mine or anyone else's) is a result of a hitch in planning, a missed opportunity, a skill deficit, or perhaps just poor timing. On reflection, though, it's clear to me that some situations don't lend themselves to influence. Sometimes an influence approach, no matter how well-thought-through or skillfully executed, will fail. In this thought piece, I'd like to consider what kinds of situations these are and what to do when you are confronted with them.

Here are some of those situations:

- The other has bet his or her reputation on a particular approach or solution and can't afford to walk it back
- The other sees you as a competitor, even if you are unaware of what game is on, and doesn't want you to be seen as the winner
- You are seen as aligned with people or causes that the other perceives to be dangerous, unpopular, or politically incorrect, and agreeing with you creates a risk of being seen as part of the problematic group
- The decision, while it seems to be in process, has in fact already been made and there is an investment in a solution that is different from the one you're advocating.

When you sense that one of these or a similar set of circumstances exists, there are several things to consider:

- How important is this to you? Can you afford to withdraw gracefully and live to fight another day? If the issue is more important to the other than it is to you, "winning" will probably cost a great deal in time, energy, and relationship value. Is it worth it?
- Does the message have to come from you? Is there someone else who has a better influence relationship or is less threatening who can represent the same idea or solution?
- Is this person the only one with authority related to this issue or decision? Could you approach someone else more successfully?

- Is there a timing issue? Might you be more successful at a time when the other is less busy or stressed – or, conversely, when the other is confronted with a difficult problem and really needs your ideas and support?
- Are there related issues that might be easier to influence this person about? (This is especially useful if you suspect that a decision has already been made. For example, you may not be able to influence someone to change that decision, but perhaps you can get more support for implementing it.)

If you sense that the other person is not open to influence on a particular topic, it's especially important not to take his or her resistance personally (though, in truth, it might be meant that way). It serves no purpose to get into an escalating battle of wits about it.

If you are frequently unsuccessful at influencing specific people or groups, it's tempting to blame the targets, to see them as unreasonable, stubborn, unintelligent, or control freaks (all characterizations I've heard recently in meetings or coaching sessions). We humans like to look good to ourselves and to others – and sometimes we work out our frustrations by making others look bad, wrong, or stupid. It's understandable and can be highly entertaining as a form of group bonding or late-night comedy – but once you've labeled someone in this way, you really have disempowered yourself as an influencer with that person or group. You're likely to avoid dealing with them and thus you limit your own opportunities.

As an alternative, you can look at a difficult "influence target" as your teacher – one who can help you learn about yourself – your strengths and your limits. Ask yourself these questions when failure occurs:

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN INFLUENCE FAILS

- How much information was I willing and able to gather in advance?
- How interested was I in learning about the other's needs, issues, concerns, vested interests or priorities during the influencing opportunity?
- To what degree did I make an effort to identify with the other and imagine how he or she might be interpreting my request, suggestion, offer, rationale, etc.?
- How nonjudgmental and matter-of-fact was I able to be?
- How patient and persistent was I willing to be?
- How flexible was I willing to be?
- To what degree was I willing to be influenced by the "target?"
- To what degree and at what point was I willing to cut my losses and let go or find an alternative solution?

Successful influence is often a matter of timing. Knowing when to disengage temporarily is the mark of a sophisticated influencer. Knowing when to let go, move on, and live to influence another day is the mark of a mature, wise, and successful human being.

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NOTES

[1] Exercising Influence: Making Things Happen at Work, at Home, and In Your Community, 3rd edition. John Wiley & Sons, 2015

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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

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