

The business end

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WORKPLACE

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

There are six ways to improve your clout in the workplace. From setting goals to positioning yourself for advancement. **Report: Kate Mills**

● Jemima and John, along with others, are participating in a team meeting. They are looking for the solution to a critical problem in the business.

Jemima suggests a solution that is tossed around and, through the group's participation, is improved until it becomes a strong option. John has participated vigorously in the discussion and, as the last person to speak, positions himself as owning the solution. Jemima – although she initiated the solution – fails to nail it as her own.

While Jemima might not be conscious of it, she has failed on one of the six sources of workplace influence, expressiveness – that is, where others take notice of her contribution.

Because of this, according to a recent study, Jemima will be less able to influence outcomes and advance her career.



It's about what you can do for the organisation in return for what you expect from the organisation

Grant Robertson

Shaping up: People can learn how to influence others in the workplace

The six sources of workplace influence have been identified by UGM Consulting, partnered with Women on Boards, which together have just finished a study into influence at work. Nine hundred and four people were interviewed and there were several follow-up workshops with survey participants.

According to UGM's Grant Robertson, the six sources of workplace influence might best be seen as a "circle of work" where individuals start out (1) thinking about their goals, before progressing to (2) aligning those goals with those of others or with the company. The next step would be to (3) consider the contribution they make and (4) think how it is expressed at work. Finally, they would (5) position themselves to advance their careers and (6) consider how they could sustain their performance.

For Robertson, identifying these sources comes from years of working with clients on influencing and researching the field but the survey results have solidified that work.

Looking at the first skill, the survey results show that few people have written down short-term career goals, despite, Robertson says, all the research supporting that people with written goals feel more likely to achieve them.

"I think that people are busy and they skimp on goal planning because it's not the doing part of the job," says Robertson.

In terms of aligning goals with others or with the organisation, Robertson says that message is getting through, with more than 80 per cent of those surveyed understanding the company strategy, their bosses' stated goals and how their work relates to that strategy. This, says Robertson, is a very positive result.

"If you are delivering what others are wanting, then you are on your way to achieving and influencing," he says.

On contribution, there was a strong response, with more than 84 per cent

AUDIT YOUR INFLUENCE AT WORK

- 01** Do you have goals and a clear, written plan of how you could achieve them?
- 02** Are your efforts aligned with organisational strategy, your boss's deliverables and your own accountabilities? Do you prioritise your efforts towards the highest-value deliverables?
- 03** Is your contribution valued and acknowledged? If it's not, what might you do differently to change that?
- 04** Do you make regular, confident contributions to meetings? Note the difference between sounding like an empty vessel and offering well-considered input.
- 05** Do you invest time and thought in positioning yourself for your next role?
- 06** Are you in good shape to sustain performance over time? There's a close association between physical fitness, emotional balance and sense of meaning and purpose.

feeling they were making regular, meaningful contributions. What's worth noting, however, is that while workers feel they make a meaningful contribution, they are finding it harder, with nearly half of the respondents saying they can't deliver without over-extending themselves or compromising on quality.

Expressiveness is about how effective a person's communication is in the workplace – for example, how often they get a chance to speak in meetings. Overall, the respondents scored this highly, although Robertson points to the fact that a reasonably large percentage of people still don't get the chance to speak at meetings.

Positioning relates to how well people feel ready for the next role. Respondents were highly confident on this point, with 79 per cent feeling they were ready for the next level. Robertson notes, though, that while they felt ready to move up, more than half weren't focused on building and maintaining their professional networks, despite the fact that "networking is seen as important and has been strongly linked to career progression".

The final skill of sustaining performance relates to physical, mental and spiritual well-being and its role at work. Here men outstrip women, 75 per cent of them valuing physical fitness and exercising regularly, compared with

59 per cent of women. Overall, the biggest single divider of whether people were good at influencing came down to one pivotal point – whether they understood the importance influence plays.

The implication is that once people understand how important it is to influence, the better they are at it and vice-versa.

Robertson says "there is a strong association" between understanding the importance of influencing and being influential. In the study, those who said they understood influence scored higher on every point than those who did not.

For Robertson, it would be helpful if people understood influence and saw it "as an exchange of your efforts overall – it's about exchanging what you can do for the organisation and delivering on that in return for what you expect from the organisation".

The thing about influence is that good influencers often influence innately, so they are not necessarily able to assess the skill and apply it equally well in all contexts and they do not necessarily know how to pass this skill onto others.

"Those that have huge confidence [about influencing] aren't able to transmit it to others," he says.

"They are using the skills intuitively and they think that everyone should be able to do it and can blame them when they can't."

The good news is Robertson believes that people can learn how to influence – it doesn't need to be the sole terrain of those that are naturally charismatic.

"It can be learned," he says, "and there are a number of good models and hundreds of skills that people can use."

One part of that, he suggests, might be to simply work through the six categories.

"Ask yourself what are your goals? Are you aligned? How do you express at meetings?" he says.

"This isn't just about work, it's about life, too – those that aren't effective [at influencing] can be languishing in life's purpose."

What would be good, though, would be if life's natural influencers met poor influencers half-way.

"Good influencers could think about how they are effective and if they see people influencing badly be helpful on a one-on-one basis," Robertson says.

"They could give them hints and tips on how to reframe pitches." **BRW**

MANAGEMENT + LEADERSHIP

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Conversations worth talking about

● A recent addition to the lexicon of junk jargon is "conversation". Prime Minister Julia Gillard is very big on having conversations with the nation, although the nation stopped listening long ago. As the economy deteriorates, employers are also keen to have conversations with their employees – usually just before another round of cuts.

But just because "conversation" has been turned into a weasel word doesn't mean we should forget about the value of real conversations. In fact, we should reclaim this perfectly lovely word before its true meaning is lost to us. Although I do wonder in this age of social media and personal music devices whether conversation is a lost art.

Psychologist Hilary Armstrong says conversations matter. In the workplace, she says, relationships are made and broken one conversation at a time. "Each meeting, each conversation you take part in will shape your relationship with the person you talk with," says Armstrong, director of education at the Institute of Executive Coaching. "There is no outcome or result in the workplace that does not require a conversation."

Some workplace conversations are contentious and difficult. Most of us will have such conversations during our working lives: facing a workmate with under-performance, disagreeing with a colleague, standing up to a demanding manager or calming an angry customer, any of which can lead to stress, sleepless nights or diminished productivity.

Despite their importance, Armstrong points out that neither school students nor university undergraduates are taught how to conduct an effective, let alone a difficult, conversation. "Every day in every workplace, especially in these unstable times of restructures and redundancies, there are difficult conversations that need to be had and very few people with the skills and training to have them," she says.

Organisations that encourage diverse conversations – conversation about expectations and support, praise and acknowledgement as well as feedback and confrontation – are healthy organisations, Armstrong believes.

"No performance management system, psychological, diagnostic or development plan, can replace a regular mindful conversation," she says. "Through effective conversations people flourish and organisations grow cultures that attract and retain talented people."

Armstrong is clearly someone worth having a conversation with.

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