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INFLUENCE - WEAPON OR TOOL?

Using influence as a tool

1. Framing the exchange you're about to have is vital. If you choose to see others as the enemy, then you're likely to have a win-lose mindset. Sometimes this may serve you well, but in most exchanges you're not at war! The people you are seeking to influence are actually colleagues. A win-win mindset is much preferred, particularly since it is likely to set the scene for future, mutually beneficial exchanges.

2. Connection is a powerful new currency in the Knowledge Economy. While what you know is important, its value is exponentially increased by who you know. You're unlikely to make too many helpful connections, if you wield influence as weapon for compliance, rather than a tool to enhance collaboration.

3. A reasonable synonym for collaboration is cooperation, or working willingly with someone else. This is a good place to remind ourselves that people want to be able to contribute so that they can feel a sense of belonging. One way traffic, including not listening, is a sure-fire way to kill collaboration.

4. It's possible that you or others are unintentionally wielding influence as a weapon. It might be useful to check whether you are doing this. Also, if it appears others might be doing it, is that what they intended?

To what end?

The team finalised their approach to the forthcoming negotiations. "Turn down the temperature", said one. "Yes", responded another, "and let's squeeze them together on the other side". "And make sure we give them only limited opportunities to speak, only when we permit", said a third. Everyone nodded vigorously, rubbing their hands gleefully as they imagined the unpleasant environment they were setting up for their negotiating adversaries. They smiled at each other smugly, as the other team entered the room.

So, were they about to fight for the life of their business? Or perhaps they were a team meeting with the detested but weak regulator? In fact, neither of these scenarios. This was a group of carefully selected, middle managers during a simulation on a high potentials leadership program. They were representing Head Office and were about to negotiate with a business unit in their company. Yes, at the end of the day, these 'adversaries' were actually (or supposedly) on the same team! Needless to say, their ruthless tactics served only to force compliance and cement divisions. They were bent on a 'win-lose' outcome, which they achieved, and collaboration was never discussed.

Weapons of compliance

The behaviour of these high potential middle managers might not have been quite as bad as the research subjects who administered increasingly large electric shocks in an experiment. They did so even when they were aware the shocks could be dangerous and the 'victims' were screaming in agony.

All a research set-up, of course, so no real shocks. But this was an awful expose of compliance. In a similar way, our team of managers were simply following the orders of their bosses to get a favourable outcome. They chose to use an array of 'tough' negotiating tactics they'd learned and/or experienced during their business careers (and certainly not on the UGM Leadership Program!).

The fiercely competitive mindset in the company definitely impacted the behaviour of these middle managers. Win-lose was not only okay, it was the only way! Their environment nurtured and rewarded this way of thinking. It was as if many were actually hard-wired for coercion and compliance.

If this is how they treated colleagues in the same business, you may well be wondering how they approached suppliers and clients. How could they be expected to change suddenly?

Where does this come from?

Truth be told, this is reflective of the win-lose mindset of the Cold War. It was also the mindset of

many of the senior leaders in the businesses these younger middle managers had worked for and learned from. To some degree, it was a style that suited the Industrial Economy which had generated it. Largely, scale was king and capitalist enterprises grew through domination and conquest.

A rapidly changing environment

Scale will always be a factor. However in the Knowledge Economy scale and substantial value are derived from *connection* and *collaboration* rather than purely ownership of everything. Influence that creates and combines the best ideas usually delivers greatest value. It's not forcing ideas on someone else but rather placing perspectives open-mindedly into a collaborative mix.

More and more people are choosing to connect and share through technology. These technologies may be developed and initially promoted by enterprising companies, but the power is with the people. If users don't adopt a technology, it will die - quite quickly. Google's innovative but under-subscribed Wave application is a current case in point. The rapid take-up of mobile phones and the myriad of internet applications, such as You Tube and Facebook, leave no doubt that people of all cultures want to connect and they want to collaborate. And it's all about freedom to choose, rather than compliance. Compliance is seldom embraced or even welcomed.

The weapon of compliance has value in a very limited range of circumstances. In contrast, *influence* can be powerful tool for fostering connection and collaboration.

Tool or weapon?

How different might that negotiation have ended if the 'Head Office' team had warmly welcomed their rather apprehensive colleagues. What if they had organised the most convivial surroundings possible, and sought to listen and respond collaboratively to concerns and suggestions coming from the business unit? There is little doubt that the outcome would have been much more positive - immediately more beneficial and, in the longer-term, probably more sustainable. Better for the individuals involved, and ultimately better for their company also.

While it may be true that the high potential middle managers were simply regurgitating lessons from others, it is also true that during the simulation they exercised choice. In fact, since it was only a simulation, they could have chosen to experiment with other ways of negotiating to test new ideas and expand their repertoire. But they chose to use influence as a weapon rather than a tool.

Every day you make choices like these. Do you choose to wield influence as a tool or as a weapon?