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What to do about influencing skills?

1. "Understanding influence" seems strongly associated with many personal influence at work contexts. As a first step, identify all the contexts in which you should be exercising influence. Make a 'long list'.
2. Take your long list and prioritise in terms of relative impact. Choose perhaps your top 5. How well do you influence in these contexts? Is your influencing consistent, or does your influence vary even within those five contexts? For example, do you generally get speaking turns in meetings when you want them or is your influence much more situational?
3. What about colleagues? We like to maintain good relationships, so it gets tough when we have to reject their ideas. Are there ways you can help them structure their arguments to be more influential?
4. Do you have direct reports? How many times do they fail to influence you? What about when they are representing you or your team? How might you help them be more influential?
5. At an organisational level, it's possible that influencing ability has a substantial impact on both organisational performance and organisational health. What is your organisation's "Personal Influence" score?

UNDERSTAND INFLUENCE TO GET AHEAD

The impact of influence at work

It's unlikely to surprise you that ability to influence contributes to getting ahead at work. Researchers found recently that influencing is positively associated with promotions, career satisfaction, external job mobility and even life satisfaction. They also tested total compensation, which didn't show a statistical association.

Since so much time is spent working, most people want to get ahead at work. In the past few years studies have repeatedly highlighted the long hours that Australian are now working – among the highest in the world.

As our major research project for 2011, UGM decided to explore what individual-based factors in the workplace make a difference to people getting ahead. Initial research led to us using a 'personal influence' lens. What sources of influence do people draw on in the workplace?

In association with Women on Boards, we then focused specifically on how these sources relate to two of the key diversity challenges of the day – gender and generation. Our large study polled over 900 people in Australia's workplaces.

An unexpected finding

The very last of the 28 influence-related questions in the Personal Influence Questionnaire (PIQ) related to understanding influence. When we grouped the responses according to understanding of influence (high or low), the profound effect on responses to the other questions surprised us.

Overall, around 65% of respondents self-reported as having a high understanding of influence (HU). This meant that some 300 respondents (35%) have a low understanding of influence (LU). There is no discernible difference between genders.

In terms of actually exercising influence (versus just understanding it), 92% of both men and women in the HU group regularly and confidently exercise influence. In contrast, only 54% of LU women and 51% of LU men say they do the same. This is the first indicator of some enormous differences between the HU and LU groups.

Dealing with 'blockers' and conflict

The largest difference for both men and women relates to skills to deal with workplace blockers. 84% of men and 74% of women from the HU group felt they had these skills. Compare this with only 30% of men and 28% of women from the LU group!

A larger number of the LU group reported they have skills to deal with conflict, as did those in the HU group. As a result the HU-LU gap remained wide. 86% of the HU group say they have conflict skills.

But, only 48% of women and 34% of men in the LU group have these skills. Inability to deal with conflict likely impacts productivity and well-being.

Performance in meetings

Meetings are pivotal in most workplaces. UGM research shows that, during meetings, colleagues make both informal and formal assessments about leadership capability and contribution. So, meetings are important in getting ahead!

90% of women in the HU group feel they get speaking turns when wanted, and 93% feel they are clear and confident. In comparison, only 68% of the LU women report getting wanted speaking turns and 71% feel clear and confident in meetings.

The differences are even higher for men. In the HU group, 96% said they get speaking turns when wanted and the same number felt they are clear and confident in meetings. Only 59% of men in the LU group said they get speaking turns when wanted and 62% say they are clear and confident in meetings.

From a workforce perspective, large numbers are making sub optimal contributions in meetings. What impact is this having on innovation? Ideas may prevail, not because they are the best, but owing to the confidence of the originators. Other studies show that first ideas offered are often the ones eventually chosen. These usually come from the more extroverted individuals in the group.

Sense of acknowledgement of contribution

Sense of acknowledgement of contribution in a career enhancing way is the key gender difference identified in the study. People derive a greater sense of belonging and usually increase efforts when they're acknowledged. When contributions are overlooked, future efforts usually decrease.

In our study, 67% of HU women felt their contributions are acknowledged in a way that enhances their careers. Alternatively, almost one third of HU women don't feel this! For the LU women it's worse. Only 40% feel their contributions are acknowledged in career enhancing ways.

Men fare much better, but there is still concern. 84% of HU men say they get career enhancing acknowledgement, compared with only 62% of the LU group. Even if managers and organisations are acknowledging their people, it's not being noticed. Organisations can't afford having high numbers feeling efforts aren't appropriately acknowledged.

Influence as a key area of focus

Ability to influence impacts both individuals and organisations. The Personal Influence at Work study shows that the effects may be far wider and deeper than either organisations or individuals imagined.