



DO YOU RISK BEING LABELLED ‘A MANIPULATOR’?

What’s your default influencing style?

Which of these statements most accurately describe your default approach to influencing?

1. It is of paramount importance that the focus is on getting my point across, so I make sure the other party understands very clearly what I want out of the influencing exchange.
2. Everything is up for grabs in an influencing exchange. I manoeuvre in any way that maximises what I get for myself. The street-smart deserve to prosper.
3. I think of what I would consider mutually-beneficial outcomes and then, without wavering, I work very hard to have others accept that obviously mutually beneficial position.
4. I think of what I want out of an influencing exchange and recognise that others are likely to have different expectations. The influencing exchange aims at mutual benefit, with both parties likely adapting their expectations.

Influencing Style

1. Asserting
2. Manipulating
3. Presuming
4. Influencing

Influencing well intentioned, but...

Alison frequently devoted some time before most meetings to thinking about business outcomes. As a senior leader she sincerely believed in the value of engaging people. Alison saw herself as a successful influencer. She attributed her success in part to her strong orientation to pursuing mutually beneficial influencing outcomes. Rightly, Alison recognised that a powerful factor in influencing success involves considering the ‘What’s in it for Me’ (WIIFM) of all parties.

Being rather pragmatic, Alison was a little disappointed but nevertheless accepting when a particular influencing conversation did not have the successful outcomes she had anticipated. “Win some, lose some”, she thought. But, at least she’d given it a “red hot go”. Alison reasoned that it wasn’t the first time this had happened, and surely wasn’t going to be the last either. Resiliently she framed it as a minor issue and she quickly moved on.

She thought it was behind her. But, a couple of days later, Alison was mortified when she learned from a trusted colleague that the other party in the failed influencing conversation had subsequently labelled her “a manipulator”. How could that be? She certainly had encountered manipulators during her career – too many she felt! After one particular episode, where she had felt deceived and exploited by a colleague, she had decided always to focus on outcomes that were mutually beneficial. She reflected back to her preparations for the meeting and then the exchange itself. She had definitely pushed hard for mutually beneficial outcomes. How could that approach possibly be seen as manipulative?

How do manipulators operate?

How is it that Alison could sincerely adopt a mutually beneficial position yet still be seen as manipulative? To answer that, let’s look at two core characteristics of manipulators. Firstly, they will do whatever it takes to look after their own interests. Sometimes that’s just selfishness. Not pleasant, but not the end of the world either.

However, manipulators are all too often also deceitful, and that’s when they really cross the line for most. They often seem to possess incredible agility in the moment – magicians extraordinaire. They skilfully wrangle their selfish outcomes without the other party necessarily realising how they’re being duped. They’re only satisfied when they get away with the largest possible gains for themselves with the smallest possible concessions to the other party. Strong emotions are aroused in the ‘victims’ after the fact, partly due to their ‘loss’ and partly from annoyance at falling prey to the slick deceptions of the manipulator.

Reflecting on the modus operandi of manipulators, Alison could still not see how she could be labelled a manipulator. Her focus was on mutual benefit rather than self-interest and she pursued those benefits in a single-minded way. She didn’t chop and change her position to gain advantage in the moment.

Two critical influencing errors

Despite her intentions of obtaining mutually beneficial outcomes, Alison unwittingly made two critical influencing errors. They’re insights that resonate powerfully with participants on UGM’s influencing and leadership programs, especially when they realise they quite often run the same risks as Alison of being misunderstood and mislabelled.

First, when Alison pondered possible outcomes of each influencing situation, she thought carefully about the possible benefits. While her intentions were good, she failed to realise that she was using her own framing of what was beneficial. In the influencing conversation that went sour, Alison’s view of what was beneficial did not coincide with that of her counterpart. As a result, even though it wasn’t accurate, the colleague felt that Alison was selfishly pursuing her own ends at their expense. Alison had incorrectly assumed the other party valued the same outcomes she desired but they didn’t. Instead of appearing collaborative, because she based her influencing on mutual interest, she unintentionally came across as being selfish.

Her second error compounded the first. Because she felt she was clear on mutual benefit, her approach was particularly focussed, to the extent of single-mindedness. She was oblivious to the different ways in which outcomes might be valued. During the influencing exchange she didn’t come across as being passionate about mutual benefit. Instead it appeared as if she was inflexible and unflinching. Along with the other party’s initial assessment that Alison was only focusing on her own interests, her inflexibility seemed to confirm suspicions that Alison was indeed a manipulator. Even though these assumptions were wrong, it proved to be a costly misunderstanding.

The fine line between presuming and manipulating

UGM’s influencing model categorises Alison’s style as Presuming. While she has mutual interest at heart, she approaches her influencing in a rather single-minded way. In so doing, any time the counterpart values outcomes differently she could come across as being selfish. Her challenges increase when she passionately pursues those misplaced intentions as she is also then incorrectly diagnosed as being bloody-minded about getting her own selfish way. The line between presuming and manipulating can be extremely fine but the cost of crossing it severe. How often do you operate in the ‘presuming’ mode?