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## Career Compass No. 92: Leveraging Six Sources of Influence

Increasing your influence so your ideas and perspectives are taken seriously, resulting in a positive impact?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Aug 09, 2021 | ARTICLE

*Dear Frank -*

*I am a public works division manager in a large urban county. In my role, I have a lot of authority. People follow me not just because of my formal role, but I also am quite experienced and have a demonstrated record of success.*

*Over the past several years and especially during the pandemic, senior management created a number of multidepartment, cross-functional teams that occasionally include outside stakeholders. These teams are helping our county organization address a variety of demands related to community health and safety, remote work, the budget shortfall, homelessness, racial equity issues, talent development, and community engagement. I serve on several of these cross-functional teams.*

*The problem is that during these team meetings my ideas are often minimized or ignored. I try to maintain my active engagement but I'm becoming discouraged. I'm committed to the county organization and the communities that we serve, and I'd like to make more of a difference.*

*How do I increase my influence so my ideas and perspectives are taken seriously, and I can have a positive impact?*



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More and more of our work in local government is done in multifunctional teams outside of our department silos. We cannot solve adaptive problems (such as the pandemic,

racial justice, affordable housing, climate protection, or automation of service delivery) in our silos. The problems are too big and complex with few if any right or wrong answers. We need to engage different departments and outside stakeholders. I congratulate you for wanting to make a positive contribution in these cross-cutting team settings. The challenge for you is that your formal authority and expertise are not sufficient.

When you cross a boundary from your public works department and join a multidepartment team, you lose authority and control. Others do not have to follow. Therefore, you must increase and leverage other forms of influence.

*“YOUR FORMAL AUTHORITY AND EXPERTISE ARE NOT SUFFICIENT.”*

## What Is Influence?

Influence is defined as the capacity to effect the actions, behaviors, opinions or development of others.

I believe that influence is more important than formal authority. Your positional authority as a manager can only force a minimal level of compliance and performance from others. Followers decide to follow or not to follow.

## Management vs. Leadership

Management is based on one’s formal authority as a manager. Management attempts to direct and control people through structure and systems in order to increase efficiency in the pursuit of organizational goals. Managers typically ask “what,” “how,” and “when.” At its worst, management treats employees as means to an end.

Leadership is based on one’s interpersonal attributes (I would even suggest one’s moral or spiritual attributes). It has nothing to do with position. You can lead from any place. Leadership attempts to win the hearts and minds of others. Instead of directing and controlling, leaders attempt to facilitate collaboration and contributions in pursuit of shared goals. Leaders typically ask about “why” and “where are we going.” Leaders see their responsibility as developing employees and bringing out the best in them. Good leaders grow more leaders.

Management tries to direct and control. Leadership tries to exert positive influence.

Leadership is about starting conversations, convening people, facilitating problem-solving and mobilizing action, all in an environment where there are no right or wrong solutions and every group can block you.

To address the big challenges of the day, we cannot rely solely on management. We need both good management and good leadership.

*“FOLLOWERS DECIDE TO FOLLOW OR NOT TO FOLLOW.”*

If leadership is about influence, what are different sources of influence and how do you leverage them?

## Leveraging Six Sources of Influence

I have identified six different sources of influence that you can leverage in making a positive difference as a leader.

### 1. Formal Authority

Formal authority is based on your position in the organization. As public works division manager, you have the ability to direct people under your command to accomplish certain tasks. In doing so, you identify goals for the group, provide resources to employees, reward them for good performance, and ultimately may discipline them for poor performance or noncompliance. Again, this type of coercive power by itself can only produce a minimal level of positive results.

#### Ways to enhance formal authority

- To enhance your formal authority, you can of course seek and secure a promotion to a more senior level of management. However, the best way to achieve more positive results is to combine formal authority with other forms of influence (see below).

### 2. Technical Expertise

Another source of influence is your subject matter expertise. As you indicated, your public works division employees follow you because “you have a record of success.” Up to a certain point, your direct reports will tend to follow you if you are an expert in the work and you know how to solve technical problems.

However, in addressing adaptive challenges where there are no easy answers and all groups have different values and preferred solutions, expertise is somewhat important but insufficient. As a source of influence, expertise is limited if it is not complemented by “soft” people or leadership skills.

#### Ways to enhance technical expertise

- Technical expertise can be enhanced by further training and professional education, especially as the world changes and becomes more complex and uncertain. For instance, as environmental sustainability and climate protection become bigger issues, public works professionals need to further develop their expertise in these areas.

- To become more influential on any multifunctional team, you might also want to research and become more knowledgeable about the areas of focus for the team. For example, if your team is focusing on equity and inclusion issues for your organization, you should do more professional reading on the topic, attend a workshop or two, interview some key informants, and research best practices.
- As the management guru Gary Hamel asks, “Are we learning as fast as the world is changing?”

### 3. Organizational Competency

A third source of influence is organization competency, which is the knowledge of “how things are done around here.” In a complex organization, a person with organizational competency knows who to go to in order to get resources, overcome obstacles, cut red-tape, or influence higher-ups. These other colleagues are scattered throughout the organization and serve as key influencers, communicators, and problem solvers. If you

know how to make the organization apparatus work for the team, you will be valued by team members and are going to have some influence.

*“ARE WE LEARNING AS FAST  
AS THE WORLD IS  
CHANGING?”*

#### Ways to enhance organizational competency

- To enhance organizational competency, you need to pay attention to who gets things done throughout the organization. These may not be people necessarily in formal management roles. They are informal “go-to” people who can make things happen. To increase your organization competency, you might want to develop an organizational “map” in your head or in writing, identifying the location of these key individuals and what value they can provide. They could be situated in the finance, HR or community development departments, or in the administrator or manager’s office.
- While you may know who to go to, it does not mean you can actually secure their help in solving some of the team’s problems. To secure their active assistance, you need an ongoing relationship and rapport with them (see below).
- To create an organizational map and to secure the help of these go-to people, you may need some coaching. Informal or formal coaches can be trusted colleagues, bosses/mentors, or sponsors (see [Career Compass No. 48: How Do I Benefit From a Coach?](#)). These coaches can provide advice on how to navigate the organizational bureaucracy to get what the team needs and thus, in the process, increase your influence with the team.

### 4. Relationship/Connection

It is my belief that relationship and connection are the critical sources of influence. If you create relationship with people inside and outside the organization, they will tend to consider your perspectives and ideas more seriously and will be more likely to follow you.

Creating relationship must be a conscious strategy and requires that you devote your limited time and energy to the effort. Relationships are even more important when you exit your department silo, cross boundaries, and collaborate with others on multifunctional teams or groups including outside stakeholders.

*“RELATIONSHIP AND CONNECTION ARE THE CRITICAL SOURCES OF INFLUENCE.”*

Of course, these relationships are not only instrumental in helping you achieve your goals, but they also create meaning for you and enhance your life. We spend the majority of our waking hours doing work so why not have positive relationships that enrich us.

#### Ways to enhance relationship/connection

To create relationship and connect with others:

- Spend time and energy on forging ties with others.
- Find one-to-one opportunities to engage in conversations, either in person or remotely (see [Career Compass No. 61: Leadership Is the Art of Conversation](#)).
- Ask team mates questions about their non-working lives (family, leisure pursuits, sports, travel plans); identify common interests (see [Career Compass No. 79: Leading By Connecting](#)).
- Check in with others; ask about their work (their projects, what is working well, what is challenging, what they are learning, how they are coping in working from home).
- Explore in your conversations with others what motivates them; then frame your ideas in different ways so the ideas resonate more strongly.
- Provide any resources or support or just a friendly ear.
- Ask in team meetings questions, such as:
  - Why is this project important to you?
  - What does success look like to you?
  - How might we . . . ?
  - What is your idea?
  - What are one or two steps forward?
- Listen and acknowledge what you hear (even if you may not agree). As Dan Rockwell says, “listening multiplies your influence.” ([Leadership Freak](#) blog, “[Anticipation as Leadership Advantage](#),” August 4, 2017.)
- Share some vulnerability (“I made a mistake.” “I don’t know how to proceed.” “I need your help.”). Vulnerability creates connection and trust (see [Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability](#)).
- Trust others to engender trust (see [Career Compass No. 42: Trust Me!](#))

## 5. Referent Influence

If you can leverage your network of relationships with others for the good of the team, you have what I call “referent” influence. You have this kind of influence if colleagues perceive your connection to others who clearly have influence. For instance, if you have a relationship with neighborhood or business group leaders or the county sheriff, or in your case the public works director, you can engage these potential stakeholders in support of the team’s efforts and thus enhance your value and influence with team members.

To leverage your referent power, you may be able to schedule meetings with your contacts, secure their ideas and support, or even attract their resources. If they are influential themselves, they may serve as one of the “faces” of the project. For example, our homelessness team in Palo Alto, California, was able to engage faith and business leaders to support a homeless multiservice center and supportive housing project. With this kind of support, it was difficult for the city councilmembers to oppose the project.

### Ways to enhance referent influence

- To enhance and leverage referent power, you must be on the lookout for potential “influencers” inside and outside the organization. You can make your own introduction or ask your boss, a colleague or coach to make an introduction so you can have an initial conversation. Your goal is to identify the interests of the other party, share some of yourself, and create a connection. Since expanding and then leveraging your network takes time and energy, you must strategize and prioritize who will benefit your work. Then meet one new contact a month. Make sure to keep in contact and support their efforts whenever possible. Relationship involves **mutual** support and benefit.
- Again, building a network of relationships is instrumental in terms of your work goals but also enriches your life.

*“RELATIONSHIP INVOLVES  
MUTUAL SUPPORT AND  
BENEFIT.”*

## 6. Your “Best Self”

The final source of power is simply striving to be your “best self.” You can exert the influence of your “best self” by showing up to work with a positive mindset. Ask yourself, am I showing up to:

- Serve others.
- Look forward (not backward).
- Listen and acknowledge what I hear.
- Demonstrate empathy (see [Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower](#)).
- Encourage and support others.
- Provide resources to others.

Everyone is now more likely than ever to be distracted. Therefore, consciously show up to be fully present and serve. This attitude and related behaviors will help you exert positive influence.

Another way to be your best self is to live your “moral self.” Your moral self is about living your purpose and values (integrity, equity, justice, community, service to others) at work and sharing your goals for the organization and the community. (See [Career Compass No. 57: Leading by Living Your Values.](#))

You are not pushing your values and beliefs on others or trying to persuade others to adopt them. Rather, you are sharing what is important to you. And, as a leader, you invite others to share their purpose and values as well.

*“YOU ARE NOT PUSHING YOUR VALUES AND BELIEFS ON OTHERS OR TRYING TO PERSUADE OTHERS TO ADOPT THEM.”*

Let me give you an example. As a newly appointed city manager of Palo Alto, California, the organization was faced with a massive budget shortfall as a result of the dot-com bust in 2000-02. The budget team recommended eliminating the jobs of city hall custodians and contracting out the work for a cheaper price. I told the budget team to find other cuts since the custodians were lower-income men and women of color who earned a relatively decent salary and full benefits with which they could support their families. Not everybody in the organization agreed with my decision, but most recognized that the decision was based on my personal value of equity and social justice. My value-based decision increased my influence and support in the organization.

You can be truly (or mostly) authentic at work. Authenticity is understanding your true self and then showing up at work to act in such a way to reflect that self.

#### Ways to express your best self and leverage this kind of personal power

- In advance of any meeting or interaction, one way to be your best self is to take a deep breath, eliminate distractions, be fully present, and consciously commit to serve others.
- To leverage your “moral self.”
- Ask:
  - For you, what is the personal meaning or purpose behind this project?
  - What values, ideas, or goals are we fighting for?
  - What energizes you about this project?
  - What ideas are we fighting for?
  - What is the common good here?
  - Who is missing from the conversation inside and outside the organization?

- What are the unintended consequences of our proposed action? (If your team is working with a developer to tear down blighted apartments in order to build luxury units, there are consequences for those displaced.)
- Share your purpose and values about the work or initiative
- Model behaviors and make decisions that support your values and beliefs

## A Mini Case Study

Let me provide a mini case study of creating and leveraging one’s personal influence. During one of my tenures as city manager, I worked with an excellent executive assistant whose name was Marta. Marta was a quiet person but very committed to the organization and to her value of serving others.

To make a bigger difference in the organization and to serve others, Marta called together all the other administrative assistants (AAs) of the department heads in the organization for a monthly meeting. At every meeting, Marta would bring coffee and bagels and arrive early to informally socialize. She asked everyone to contribute items for the agenda, including any proposed policy or procedure changes, project updates, or challenges. Marta would also ask me or a department director to attend and provide

*“YOU WANT TO DEVELOP A PORTFOLIO OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF INFLUENCE.”*

updates or receive input. She would also communicate the views of the administrative assistants to me as the city manager or to all the department heads at our executive team meetings. Through Marta’s efforts, she gave voice to the AAs and the group became influential. It was obvious to all participants that Marta wanted to serve them and cared about them.

Marta thus built up a great deal of influence. She convened the group, developed a lot of relationships and connections in all the departments, and was able to use her relationship with me and other department heads for the good of the group. Marta did not gain influence due to any formal authority or expertise. Her influence grew out of connecting with others, using her referent power, and leveraging her best self.

## Expanding Your Portfolio of Influence

You need to embrace the opportunity to enhance your influence with others. Stop saying “I’m being ignored. I can’t change anything.” Rather, start asking “What small change might I make today in order to exert more influence for the good of the team?” (See Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak* blog, [“How to Find Freedom and Energy by Starting Again,”](#) Oct. 15, 2020.)

Over time, you want to develop a portfolio of different kinds of influence. Some formal authority and technical expertise are valuable but you can lead without them. (See Wanda Wallace and David Creelman, [“Leading People When They Know More Than You Do,”](#) *hbr.org*, June 18, 2015.) In addition to any authority or expertise, you want to



call upon other forms of influence such as relationships, referent influence, and the power of your best self.

Developing influence in all its forms is a learned skill. So start practicing.

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