



HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

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TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

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When the Direct Approach Backfires, Try Indirect Influence

by Martha Craumer



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When the Direct Approach Backfires, Try Indirect Influence

Six tactics for getting your point across with subtlety

HAVE YOU ever felt that you just weren't connecting with a colleague whose support you needed? Ever tried to work with a team that offered resistance and foot-dragging instead of cooperation? Has your feedback had the opposite effect that you intended—or has it gotten no response at all?

Fact is, leadership and management aren't quite as simple as they used to be. Companies are becoming flatter and less hierarchical; we're "commanding" less and collaborating more. And the new networked organization—with its emphasis on outside partnerships and alliances—means working with people in new ways. Add to this the challenge of dealing with a global, culturally diverse workforce and one thing becomes clear: our traditional approach to leadership—forceful, assertive, and direct—isn't always the best option, especially when the people we're trying to influence aren't direct reports.

So what's the alternative?

When direct or prescriptive methods of communication and management don't work, you may have better luck with a more subtle, indirect approach. In her new book, *The Power of Indirect Influence*, Judith Tingley explains that "indirect influence attempts are planned as intentional by the leader, but viewed as unintentional by the target person." Here are six alternatives to the direct approach:

- **Beat around the bush.** Although Western cultures tend toward direct methods of communication, other cultures take a very different approach in their business dealings—in fact, the business itself often seems to be an afterthought. Tingley tells of an American man working in Saudi Arabia who learned that getting something done

requires an indirect approach. When he needs information from a government office, he drops by and hangs around for an hour or two, drinking tea and chatting. He knows that eventually one of the workers will ask if he needs help with anything. At that point, he'll act surprised, as if he's just remembered, and then state his need, which is promptly and graciously taken care of.

We all know people who seem to succeed at getting others to do things for them without having to ask directly. We usually chalk it up to "charm." But often, it's just a matter of letting go of the agenda and taking the time to be pleasant.

Advocates of indirect influence assert that it's often better to let people figure things out for themselves, come to their own conclusions, and take initiative on their own. A lack of clarity can put more responsibility on the people you hope to influence—and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

- **Talk less, listen more.** When trying to win people over to our way of thinking, we often spend too much time explaining and convincing and not enough time asking questions, listening, and understanding other points of view.

People are less apt to put up resistance when they feel that you've taken the time to listen to and really understand their issues and concerns. In his best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says that the greatest need of human beings—after physical survival—is to be understood, affirmed, validated, and appreciated. He explains that "empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the

world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel." It is human nature to want to work with, not against, someone who "gets" us.

It seems paradoxical, but the harder we try to get our point across, the less likely we are to succeed. Think of the people you know who command the most respect, whom others line up in support of. It's often the person who speaks qui-

Our traditional approach to leadership—forceful, assertive, and direct—isn't always the best option.

etly with a few carefully chosen words that show his or her grasp of the issues at hand. Their power comes from thoughtfully listening—not from title or position.

- **Make 'em like you.** Studies consistently show that we'd rather say yes to someone we like—even a stranger—than to someone we don't like. So how can you increase your likability? Some factors, like good looks, are beyond our control. But there are other things you can do to increase rapport. Key among these is to play up similarities. We tend to like people who are like us, who share our background, interests, opinions, taste, style of dress, and so forth. We also like people who like us. Research shows that human beings are suckers for compliments—even insincere flattery.

Another way to heighten feelings of similarity is to copy the communication style, both verbal and nonverbal, of the person you're trying to influence. Tingley calls this technique "modeling and matching." By matching the gestures, body posture, vocal intonations, words, and speaking style of the person you're with, you can quickly build up comfort levels and rapport.

The social bond is another powerful influencer, as shown by the impact that friendship and name-dropping can have. In his book *Influence*, Robert

Cialdini discusses the power of the Tupperware party, noting that “the strength of a social bond is twice as likely to determine product purchase as is preference for the product.”

■ **Make ‘em laugh.** Ever wonder why so many speakers open their presentations with a joke? Humor is disarming, it’s the great equalizer, and it makes people root for us. It’s hard to feel negative when you’re laughing—and hard to dislike a person who makes you laugh.

Humor can be a very effective tool. It makes the speaker appear relaxed, approachable, and in control. It promotes relaxation and openness in the listener, which in turn increase receptivity to change, new ideas, and the influence of others. Tingley quotes Ellie Marek, author of *Eating Roses: Bites of Living Humor*: “Messages rejected when said directly are accepted when said with humor.”

Humor can create a common bond that melts resistance and encourages cooperation. But be careful. Inside jokes and cultural allusions can be off-putting to outsiders. And obviously, humor should never be at the expense of the person you’re trying to influence—nor should it make light of their issues or concerns. George Simons, an advocate of humor-driven influence, suggests that the safest approach is humor directed at one’s self.

■ **Use stories and metaphors.** Stories and metaphors help us put things in context, view the larger picture, and get in touch with our emotions. Because people make connections between a story and their own life experiences, the messages linger and can inspire real change.

“Good managers use stories to convince others of a particular view, to create shared meaning and purpose, to help create a sense of community,” says Tingley. For all of these reasons, storytelling can be a powerful tool for indirect influence.

Metaphors also guide our perception of things and of ourselves, whether we’re

aware of it or not. As an example of how strongly metaphors can affect those around us, Tingley tells the story of Dan, the CEO of an electronics manufacturing company. To maintain quality, Dan required that shift supervisors run through a quality checklist at the beginning of each shift, but compliance was low. When all direct attempts to influence the supervisors failed, Dan took a different approach. A seasoned pilot, he invited each manager to go flying with him in his private plane. The invitations were met with enthusiasm—until Dan added that he would not be running through the routine flight checklist before takeoff. The supervisors got the message loud and clear, and checklist compliance has increased.

■ **Do a favor—even a small one.** Doing something for someone gives you enormous power and influence over them—just ask any politician. In his book *Influence*, Cialdini discusses the unwritten rule of reciprocity and how it obligates us to repay what another person has given us. This rule is deeply ingrained, not just in our culture, but in every human society around the world. At one time it was integral to our survival, and it survives to this day—stronger than ever.

Cialdini cites a research study involving a group of subjects and a “plant”—a fellow named Joe—who was posing as a fellow subject. There were two control groups. Each member of the first group received a small “favor” from Joe—a Coke that he picked up for them while out of the room. The second group received no favor. Then, Joe told each group he was selling raffle tickets. The subjects who received a Coke from Joe bought twice as many tickets as the subjects who received nothing. The rule overwhelmed all other factors—including whether they even liked Joe or not. The ticket buyers felt an irresistible need to repay him.

Cialdini’s research shows that the size of the initial favor makes no difference and has little bearing on the size of the favor we feel obliged to perform in return. In fact, we typically feel the need

to repay with a larger favor. But interestingly, despite this uneven quid pro quo, we also seem unable to refuse the favors of others. Says Cialdini, “Although the obligation to repay constitutes the essence of the reciprocity rule, it is the obligation to receive that makes the rule so easy to exploit.” So the reciprocity rule is a dual-edged sword. And we as human beings are apparently unable to resist its pull.

Indirect influence is about personal power, not positional power. It’s about reacting to others, without falling back on traditional strong-arm tactics and power plays. In our culture, where directness is highly valued, some of the tactics may seem counterintuitive—even manipulative. But good leaders know that while some individuals and situations require a direct approach, others do not respond well to it—they require the subtlety and finesse of indirect influence. The important thing is to have available a wide range of influence tools and to know when to use them for the greatest impact. □

—*Martha Craumer has worked in marketing communications at CSC Index, Lotus Consulting, and Zefer. She divides her time between Cambridge, Mass., and Sarasota, Fla.*

FURTHER READING

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